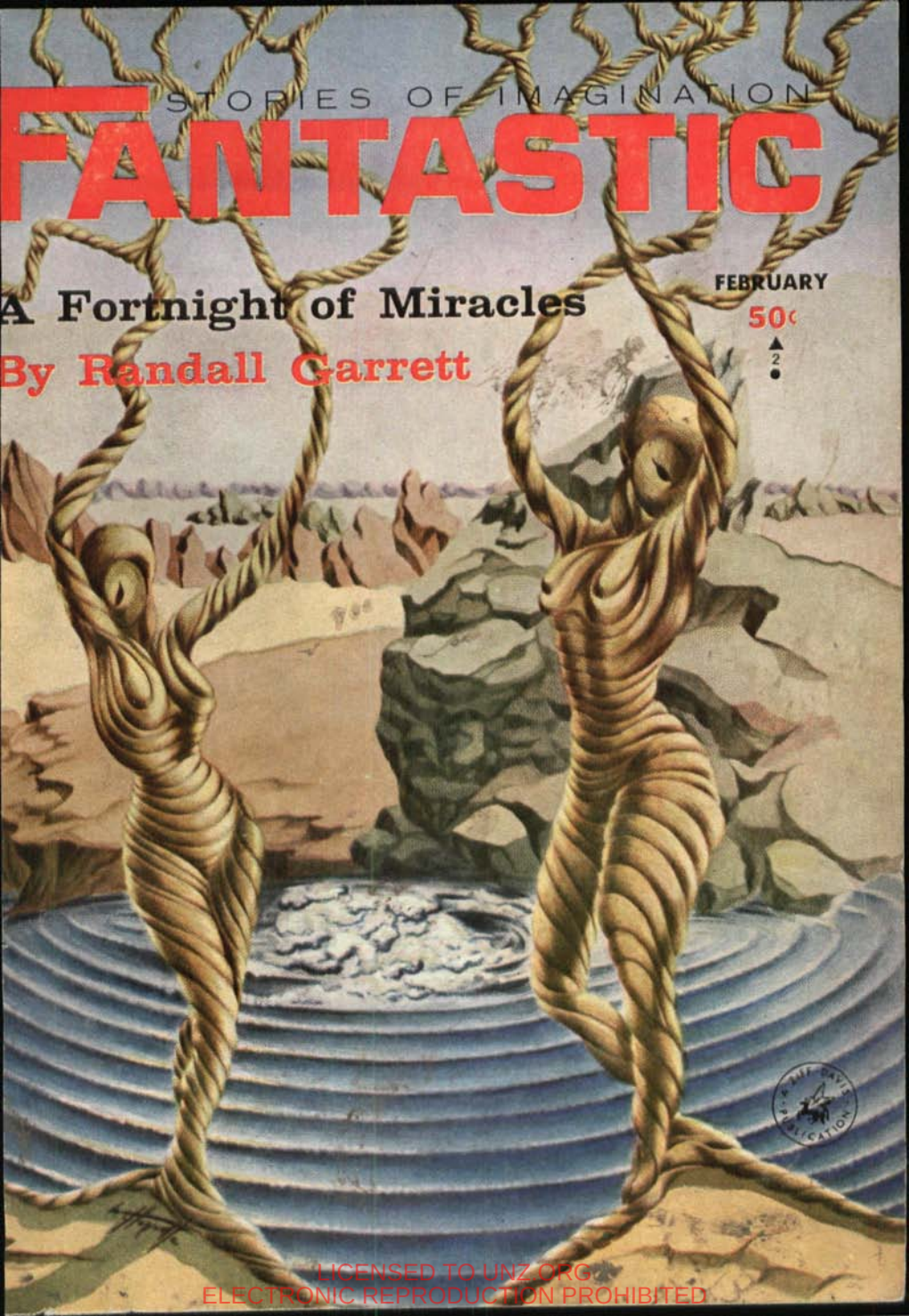

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In February AMAZING

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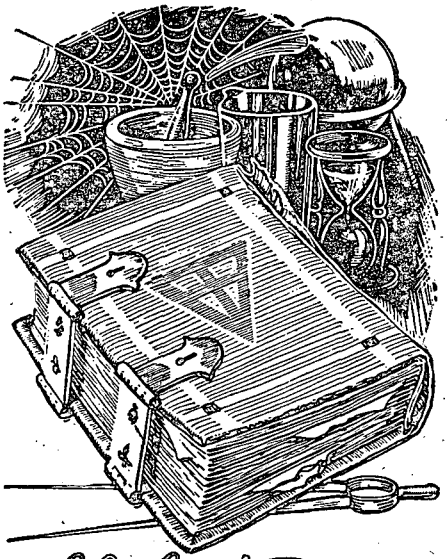
Secrets entrusted to a few



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FANTASTIC

FEBRUARY 1965
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EDITORIAL

THOSE who believe that scientific progress goes hand in hand with freedom and democracy will be glad to hear the news that down in Zambia, a newly-independent African nation that used to be Northern Rhodesia, Zambian space technology is zooming. Or something.

In Lusaka—a rather red-dusty cattle-and-copper town that is Zambia's capital and where we were once marooned overnight—one Edward Mukuka Nkoloso, self-designated Zambian Minister of Space Research, predicts the first astronaut will reach the moon in 1965, and will be a Zambian.

To this end, Nkoloso has put into gear a fabulous operation. He already has a rocket. It is 10 feet tall, made of copper, and is propelled by catapult, a drive system which passed its first tests during the Crusades. The rocket, Nkoloso has revealed, already has passed its first tests by zooming as much as six feet off the ground.

For personnel, there are Godfrey Mwango, leading astronaut, and Matha Mwamba, top woman astronaut. Matha is in training for a Mars flight in 1966 by learning to feed ten cats at once. Cats will be her in-flight companions. Godfrey is also in training, using the patented Nkoloso methods. These consist of riding the space capsule—a 40-gallon oil drum—down a long hill to get the feeling of rushing along in space; and of swinging on a long rope which is cut at the top of its flight to produce the sensation of free fall.

Among other benefits of training these exercises yield is acclimatization to the contusions and abrasions of lift-off.

Lest you think this is all a gag, it is alleged that private philanthropists have already given Nkoloso nearly $3,000 to underwrite his research. He also has requested a U.N. loan of $19 million, which will buy a lot of cats for Miss Mwamba.

Both astronauts are ready. The catapult is in position. The rocket waits, quivering. All Zambia holds its collective breath. And NASA has been worrying about Russia! —NL

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MAGUS MacCullen patted the neck of his mule, and the gesture made the pouch at his belt jingle pleasantly. "Gold and silver and two good mules," he said, with a smile that was almost hidden by his moustaches and his huge, fiery red beard. "The Count du Marche is most generous if you tap him at just the right time."

The hooded figure on the other mule might have been mistaken for a traveling monk except that no Order of the Church wore dark blue robes. In spite of the warmth of the late summer day, the hood of the habit was up, concealing the face in shadow. The voice which came from beneath the hood was not unpleasant, but the low tenor notes seemed to resonate as though the speaker were in a cavern or at the bottom of a well. "We could have stayed another five days or a week, Master Magus. Not that *I* need the rest, but you have a long way to go, and . . ."

"My dear Frithkin," Magus

A FORTNIGHT

It is hard on a man to have not one . . . nor two . . . but* three *vexish spells upon him. Such a man has need of a worthy mage and a goodly goblin . . . and an author like this one who can get him out of black-magic trouble without leaving any loose ends about.

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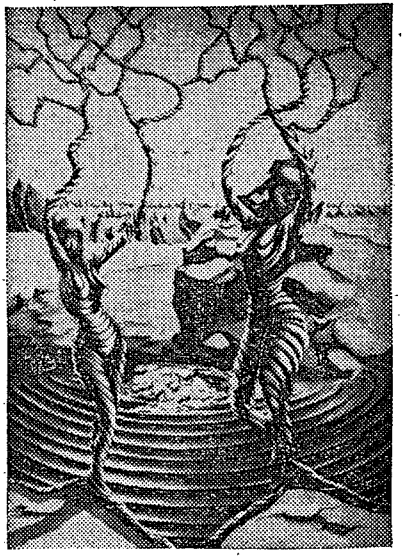
MacCullen interrupted, "if we had stayed an extra week we would have saturated the market. Always leave early. That way, they bribe you to come back. The Count and his Lady and his court were entertained for a week by the greatest magician in Christendom. They can hardly wait for us to come back—say in a year. But a fortnight of miracles would satiate even the most ardent of miracle-lovers. As it is, I keep my reputation."

"A reputation as a phony," said Frithkin glumly.

"Of course!" said the Magus. "What happens to sorcerers? What happened to Magus Prezhenski? That Baron Whatsis—the one with the unpronounceable name—wanted gold, so he decided to force Prezhenski to make the stuff for him. Laymen are always inclined to think a sorcerer can do anything God can do, I suppose. The Magus failed, of course, and the corbies were well fed for a week."

OF MIRACLES

By
RANDALL
GARRETT



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"He had it coming to him," Frithkin pointed out.

"Sure he did," the red-bearded man said agreeably. "Only a fool plays around with black magic. But does a layman know the difference? No. So I have a reputation as a clever trickster and nothing else. I'll live longer that way." He chuckled deep in his chest. "Remember that time the Earl of Weffolk tried to trap me by getting Father Finn to pull an exorcism while I was present?"

Frithkin's echoing chuckle joined that of his master. "And all the good Father could do was testify that you weren't a practitioner of black magic? I remember. If Magus Prezhenski had had—" He stopped and turned his hooded head. "What's that?"

Magus MacCullen had heard the noise, too. Both of them turned their mules to face whatever was galloping down the road behind them.

"He's coming from the direction of the Count's castle, whoever he is," said the magician. All he could see was a cloud of dust rising in the summer heat, but from it came the sound of hooves moving at a gallop. "A messenger sent by the Count, perhaps?"

"More likely he's changed his mind and wants his gold back," said Frithkin. "I suggest we head in the opposite direction."

"There's only one of him," the magician said calmly. "Besides, these mules couldn't outrun a warhorse—which, as you can plainly see, that is."

OVER the little rise that had blocked their view, the two saw their pursuer charging toward them at full tilt. A knight and his horse, both in full armor, came thundering down from the crest of the rise, the horse in full gallop, the knight in a forward crouch, his lance aimed directly at Magus MacCullen.

The Magus was already in motion. He tossed the reins of his mule to Frithkin, who caught them dexterously with bony fingers. Then he vaulted out of the saddle, his long oaken staff in one hand. While Frithkin galloped the two mules off to one side of the road, Magus MacCullen took his position in the center, his brawny legs braced, his six-foot staff of one-inch-thick oak held firmly at an angle across his body. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

Magus MacCullen made a fine target for the oncoming lance point. He stood six feet two and was broader in proportion than he ought to be. The powerful hands gripping the staff were half again as big as an ordinary man's, and, like his arms, were corded with heavy muscle. With his light blue, silver-decorated

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robes and his bright red mane of hair and beard, he stood out against the brown of the road and the dusty green of the surrounding meadow.

The oncoming knight ignored Frithkin. He charged right on down the road toward the unmoving, blue-and-silver clad figure of the sorcerer. The knight said nothing. There was no war cry, no insult, no warning—only that deadly, straightforward charge. He intended to spit Magus MacCullen on the lance and—perhaps—talk about it afterwards. MacCullen didn't move. He might have been a statue.

The steel-clad point of the lance was within inches of the Magus' breast before he moved. Almost too fast for the eye to see, and certainly too fast for the knight to react in time, the magician leaped to his right, holding the quarterstaff out to his left to fend off the lance. The heavy spear slid along the staff, deflected from its target by a full eight inches.

The great charger, unable to alter its course in the few feet it still had to travel, thundered by the Magus in full gallop. With his two hands still braced on the quarterstaff, Magus MacCullen pulled the left hand toward himself and pushed the right hand away. The lower end of the staff swung in a vicious arc and struck the horse just under the jaw.

It was like watching a mountain collapse. The horse, knocked unconscious by the blow, stumbled and fell. The armored figure in the saddle dropped the lance, did a complete somersault in the air, and landed in the road with a clatter and clang of steel armor.

Neither he nor the horse moved.

"Well, now," said Magus MacCullen. "Let's take a look at this brave, chivalrous gentleman who runs down unarmed people on the road without so much as a by-your-leave."

"It looks to me," said Frithkin from the side of the road, "as if you've done him in pretty well. Broke every bone in his body, apparently."

The fallen knight did, in fact, look as though he had suffered disastrously from his fall. His legs and arms were at angles that indicated terrible damage, and his body was twisted in a way that looked as though it had been wrung like a dishrag.

Magus MacCullen walked over and inspected the wreckage for a moment. Then he knelt down and opened the visor of the helm.

"Ha!" he said. Then he took the helmet completely off.

FRITHKIN had brought the mules up close and was looking over the sorcerer's shoulder. When the helmet came off, Frithkin said: "Ho! Nobody home?"

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"Nobody home," said the Magus in agreement. "This suit of armor is as empty as a bride's nightgown." He poked his staff inside and rattled it around to indicate the emptiness behind the breastplate.

Frithkin slid off the saddle of his mule. Afoot, he stood a scant four feet high, and his legs were so abnormally short, his arms so abnormally long, that he might have been taken for a chimpanzee. He went to the suit of armor and bent over it; with one hand, he pushed back the cowl that had covered his head. His head was as hairless as his face, and his skin was of a brownish color that reminded one of fresh-turned earth. His eyes were large, much too large to be human, making him look like a pop-eyed owl. His mouth was wide and almost lipless. His nose, like his cat-pupiled eyes, was much too large for his face. It was a magnificent nose, a huge eagle beak of a nose, a nose that jutted out a full three inches from his face. That nose was making audible sniffing sounds as its owner inspected the armor.

"Ho!" said Frithkin after a moment. "There's black magic here, all right!" He tapped his great beak with a bony finger. "'What a goblin knows, he knows by his nose,' as the old saying goes."

"That's fine doggerel verse," said the Magus, "but let's be a little more specific. What *kind* of black magic? Any specific spell?"

Frithkin sniffed some more. "Well, Master Magus, I would say it's nothing *we* need worry about. I should say that the spell has been directed against the unfortunate gentleman who owns this armor. Or once owned it, since he doesn't seem to be around himself." More sniffing. "Nothing malignant about it. Not as far as we're concerned. The spell's still here, though, which is odd. Seems to be in abeyance, but not broken."

"Find out what you can," said Magus MacCullen. "I'm going to take a look at that poor horse. Hate to hit a horse that way, but it's the only thing to do when some high-born sorehead takes it in his noggin to do a fellow in with a lance." He strode over to where the great black destrier lay on the road, breathing quietly.

"Hmmm," murmured the Magus, "doesn't look like any damage done. Legs not broken, at any rate." He knelt down and checked the legs one at a time to make sure. Then he went over to the head.

"How's your jaw, friend? Mmmm. No fracture. Just a lump. You may find it a little difficult to chew your oats and hay for the next day or two, but

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you'll be all—*oops*! Steady, boy! Steady!" He gripped his staff tightly. The warhorse had opened a large brown eye and was looking at him reproachfully. A huge stallion like this could be dangerous with teeth and hooves if he decided that the red-bearded man deserved to be punished for that oaken uppercut.

The Magus hoped it would not be necessary to bat the poor creature over the head with the quarterstaff. He kept talking soothingly to the horse.

"Yike!"

Magus MacCullen turned his head at the sound of Frithkin's voice.

The suit of armor, *sans* helm, was climbing to its feet for all the world as though there was a man inside it. Frithkin was backing away rapidly, his own quarterstaff at the ready in his goblin hands.

At the same time, the great stallion rolled to his feet and stood up.

For a moment, Magus MacCullen wondered whether it mightn't be the smart thing to club the horse again so that both he and Frithkin could give their full attention to the Empty Knight. If the steel-clad vacancy decided to draw the great sword at his side, he might be a little difficult to take care of.

But the horse stood quietly, and the armored figure did nothing but bend over and pick up the helm from the ground and put it in its proper place.

"There!" boomed a hollow voice from the interior of the armor. "First off, I want to apologize. Terrible mistake and all that. Thought you were someone else, you see. Please accept my heartfelt apologies, Master Magus—for I see you are a magician."

"Your apology is accepted, Sir Knight," said the Magus, easing his grip on his quarterstaff a little. "But I think such precipitate behavior requires an explanation, don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose it does. Here, would you mind fastening this helm back on? It's difficult to get at, and besides, gauntlets aren't exactly built for delicate work. Yes, that's it. Thank you very much." The Empty Knight grasped the helm in both gauntlets and tested its firmness. "Fine,'" he said. "Thank you again, Magus."

THEN he walked over to his horse and examined the jaw. "Painful, but no real injury," he said gently. "That's quite a trick you have there, Magus. Last time I'll try to ride down a man who has a quarterstaff, I'll tell you."

"About that explanation, Sir Knight . . ." the Magus prompted.

"Oh, yes. Well, it's rather a

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long story—and I must warn you that I can't tell you all of it, anyway. I've got a curse on me, as you may have gathered."

"I had surmised as much," said the Magus dryly.

"Yes, of course you had, being a magician and all that. Well, since we all seem to be going in the same direction, what do you say we mount up and go ahead while I make my explanation."

"That's agreeable with me," said MacCullen. "Let's go Frithkin. By the way, Sir Knight, I am the Magus MacCullen. This is my assistant and familiar, Frithkin."

"Happy to make your acquaintance, Magus. Frithkin? Not a Christian name, I think?"

"No, my lord," said Frithkin. "Fey. Faerie. I am an earth elemental, my lord. A goblin."

"Really? Don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting a goblin before. Met a tree elemental once—a dryad named Naaia. Very nice girl. Most beautiful green hair you ever saw. I guess I'm pretty much of an elemental myself, eh? Mostly steel and air, eh?" He chuckled sadly.

"I don't believe you gave us your name, Sir Knight," the Magus said pointedly as the three mounted their animals and moved on down the road.

"Well, that's the sad part about it," said the Empty Knight. "You see, I don't have a name, really. I'm not quite all here, if you see what I mean. I mean to say, I don't know *who* I am. I'm just—well, sort of *here*, if you see what I mean."

"Um," said Magus MacCullen thoughtfully. "How long has this been going on? I mean—tell me everything you can remember, from the beginning. As a white magician, I may be able to help you."

"Would you really?" There was a rather pathetic note of joy in the Empty Knight's booming voice. "That's awfully good of you. What do you need to know?"

"Begin at the beginning, as far back as you can remember. I think I know what has happened here, in a general way, but I need more evidence before I can decide what to do about it."

Magus MacCullen was in the center of the little party, with the Empty Knight on his left and Frithkin on his right. The goblin leaned over and whispered, in a voice that the knight couldn't hear, "Ask him why he tried to spit you on that pig-sticker of his."

"Later," the Magus whispered. "He'll get to it in time."

The Empty Knight was silent for several minutes. Then he said: "I can't seem to remember." His voice was gloomy. "I've just been touring the countryside for—I don't know how long. Weeks? Months? Years? I can't

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remember. Time just keeps moving on. Always does, I suppose. But still I keep looking." He sighed. "I go from castle to castle, from town to town, looking. It seems like a long time in some ways, but maybe not so very long. Of course, I don't eat, and that's pretty handy, for I haven't any money. Haven't had for a long time. Not ever, I think. Fortunately, someone is always ready to give Roderick food and a stable. Nobody'd let a horse starve. I always tell people that I've taken an oath not to take off my armor until I've fulfilled my vow—which is perfectly true. And since I only stop one night, I can tell them I'm fasting that day—which is true, if misleading. It gets lonely at times, but knight errantry is a lonely job, anyway. I'm not complaining, you understand. I just go on looking."

"Looking for what?" the Magus asked cautiously.

"Why, the magician, of course. Didn't I tell you? No, I guess I didn't. Well, that's who I'm looking for. The magician."

"*Which* magician?" Magus MacCullen asked. "Not just any old magician, I gather."

"Oh, rather not!" said the knight. "No, indeed. You see, that's where I made the mistake about you. I asked for food and lodging for my horse at that castle back there. The Count du Marche welcomed me and asked my name. I gave him the old wheeze about my being under a vow not to reveal my name or doff my armor until I'd fulfilled my quest. I said I couldn't tell him anything about the quest, either, you understand. Can't tell a fellow you're just out to catch yourself a magician, can you now? Anyway, I asked him if he'd seen any magicians lately, and he said he had, that you'd just left, as a matter of fact. By George, I thought I'd got him this time. But no. Turned out to be only you. Still, maybe you can help me find him."

"Maybe, Sir Knight," the Magus said agreeably. "Why are you looking for him?"

"Why, he's the one who did this to me, whatever it is he did. Nasty trick, I call it, leaving a man just a shell of his former self, as it were."

"Oh, you remember that, do you?"

"Well, no," the Empty Knight said after a short pause, "I can't say I really *remember* it. I just *know* it."

"I see. What does this magician look like? Do you know his name?"

"No. I don't know his name. No. But he looks . . . Hmmm. Well. Now, you know, that's awfully odd, but I really don't know what he looks like."

"Tall or short? Young or old?

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Haven't you any idea?" asked the Magus.

"Well, now, you know, I *don't*." The knight laughed hollowly. "Isn't that funny? I mean, come to think of it, I haven't the foggiest notion what the fellow looks like. None at all."

"Then how do you know I'm not him?" asked Magus MacCullen.

THE Empty Knight turned, and Magus MacCullen saw nothingness staring at him from the darkness beyond the bars of the visor of the helm. Then the knight faced forward again. "Well, because you're not at all like him, you see," he explained. "I mean, I don't know what he looks like, but I know what he *doesn't* look like, if you follow me. I'm quite certain I shall recognize him when I see him."

"Good. But if I were you, Sir Knight, I wouldn't go around trying to run a lance through every magician I came across. Some magicians are very touchy about that sort of thing and have a tendency to cast a fast spell that wouldn't do you any good. Besides, what if you kill the man you're looking for? He couldn't undo the spell if he were dead."

"That's so," the Empty Knight said complacently, "but I wasn't going to run you through, you know. I'm an expert with a lance; I was just going to catch your robe with the point and hoist you into the air. Then, if you'd turned out to be the magician I was looking for, I'd have you at my mercy, and you'd have had to take the spell off before I'd have let you down."

"Suppose he just threw another spell? Changed you into a toad or something?"

"Oh, that. Well, he couldn't, you see. I've got a protective spell on me. Very powerful. I'm proof against any magic spell except the one that will restore me to what I was before. Whatever I was. I wish I knew, but I can't remember for the life of me. If I have any life. You don't suppose I'm dead, do you? That would be a cruel joke to play on a fellow. But I *think* I'm alive. Don't you?"

"I'm pretty certain of it," said the Magus. "Look here, do you mind if I try something? I want to check on that protective spell."

"Certainly," the knight said agreeably. "If you think it'll be of some help, go right ahead."

"Not just yet," said MacCullen. "I'll let you know. Where are you headed now?"

"Oh, wherever you're going, my good Magus. It doesn't make a particle of difference to me. A knight errant doesn't care where he's going; he just goes, you know. I'll tell you what: In return for your help in finding this magician or getting rid of the

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spell on me or whatever it is you can do, I'll go along with you and protect you from danger. How's that?"

Magus MacCullen looked at Frithkin, and the goblin whispered softly:

"Go ahead, Master; take him up on it. He may be of some use to us, and, after all, he won't cost much. It's not as if he was a regular knight, who'd expect to be fed the best foods, poured the best wines, and given the best bed, and expect somebody else to pay for it into the bargain. Here we've got a perfectly good knight, cheap. Remember, Master, we've got a long way to go to the Convention, and this fellow may come in handy in a pinch."

"You're right, of course," said the Magus. He liked to think that he could take care of any danger himself, but there was no use letting pride keep him from taking advantage of a good thing.

"Very well, Sir Knight," he said aloud, "that's a bargain. You go along with us and protect us from evildoers, and I, in turn, will do my best to relieve you of that spell, either by finding the person who laid it on you and forcing him to remove it, or, failing that, solving the spell and nullifying it myself. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough, my good Magus!" the Empty Knight boomed happily. "Let us go forward, then! We shall seek adventure and take it as it comes! Comrades three, whatever may befall!"

"Oh, *brother*!" muttered Frithkin under his breath.

II.

FRITHKIN!" bellowed Magus MacCullen. "Where the devil are you?"

"Right here, Master Magus," said the goblin voice from the next room. "I've got the wine, just as you ordered."

"Then bring 'em in. I'm thirsty as Satan himself."

"I'm opening them now," said Frithkin, dexterously plying a corkscrew. He shivered a little and told himself he was lucky to have the great MacCullen for a master. Only a very powerful sorcerer could speak of His Satanic Majesty with such familiarity and get away with it.

They were lucky, Frithkin thought, to have found rooms in an inn at this hour of the evening. After dark, many inns bolted their doors and kept them bolted, and the three travelers had, in fact, come to the door of the inn just as it was about to be locked.

In the gloom, Magus MacCullen had peered up at the sign over the door and said: "What is it? The Archangel Michael?"

Frithkin, whose eyes could see

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as well in the dark as in the daylight, had said: "No, Master. It's the George and Dragon."

The Empty Knight had said: "How can you tell? They're both pictures of a knight in full armor sticking a dragon with a lance."

"Yes, my lord," Frithkin agreed, "but the Archangel Michael has wings and St. George doesn't. Shall I knock, Master Magus?"

"If you please, good Frithkin."

The goblin got down off his mule and rapped solidly on the door of the inn. Footsteps were heard from within, and a panel in the door flew open. A woman with a beak nose that looked small only in comparison to Frithkin's, and who looked as though she could bite the head off a crocodile, snapped out: "Who might you be and what d'ye want at this hour?"

"Is this the *George and Dragon*?" Frithkin asked mildly.

"That's what the sign shows, don't it?" snarled the woman. "What d'ye want?"

"I think I want to speak to George," said Frithkin.

"What? What? Who?"

"Never mind," said Frithkin. "We desire food and lodging for ourselves and our mounts."

"'We'? Who's 'we'?"

"My masters and I," Frithkin answered. "Sir Roderick the Black and the Magus MacCullen."

The woman paled visibly. She peered out, trying to see the face beneath the hood that effectively shadowed Frithkin's features. "Who? Roderick? And a magician?" She essayed a feeble smile which did not go well at all with her features. "Why didn't ye say so, good sir? Come in! Come in and welcome! I meant no harm, sir. No harm at all. There's sometimes robbers and thieves about. But I meant no harm, gentle sirs." And she had opened the door while she pattered out her apologies.

While Magus MacCullen went upstairs to inspect the rooms, Frithkin and the Empty Knight had taken the animals back to the stable under the guidance of a stable boy who looked as though he had been frightened out of his sleep by the harridan who had answered the door.

"My lord," Frithkin whispered in an aside to the knight, "I hope you don't mind my calling you Sir Roderick. I had to give her a name; it would have taken too long to go through that rigamarole about the vow. I needed a name of some kind, and the first one that came to mind was the name of your horse."

"Perfectly all right. Wonder I didn't think of it myself, long ago. Black horse named Roderick made you think of Sir Roderick the Black, eh? Very clever, my dear Frithkin. Of course, even if

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it *had* occurred to me, I couldn't have told a lie. Not chivalrous, you know. But that doesn't apply to you, naturally."

"No, my lord. We goblins are free from that particular limitation—though we have others."

WITHIN twenty minutes, everything was secure. MacCullen had ordered wine, Frithkin had obtained it from the now obsequious landlady, and was now drawing the corks with a practiced hand. He took two brass goblets from the saddlebag which he had brought upstairs after taking his and the Magus' from the mules, put the goblets on a tray with the wine bottles, and brought them in to Magus MacCullen.

"Where is our vacuous protector?" the Magus asked, pouring.

"Down in the stable, Master Magus. He says he prefers to stay with his horse. No point in wasting a bed on him, he says. Perfectly comfortable in the hayloft, he says." The wine bottle gurgled pleasantly as the goblin poured himself a drink.

"Good. That'll give us a chance to discuss this problem and turn it to our benefit if possible. What do you think of our knightly friend?"

"Not much brains," said the goblin, sipping at his wine.

The Magus glowered. "None at all. You saw the inside of that helm. What would you expect? According to my analysis—which, I admit, is only tentative—this knight has been partially disembodied. Part of his spirit is still in his body somewhere; the rest of it is activating that suit of steel. Neither by itself is a whole man. How does that fit in with what your nose tells you?"

Frithkin gently stroked that magnificent member with thumb and forefinger. "All I can tell you, Master, is that somebody put a black spell on him—and a real whopping powerful one, too. Then someone—maybe the same person, but I doubt it—put a white spell on him, which has partially, but far from completely, counteracted the black one. Laid over the whole is the protective spell he spoke of. It seems to be a pretty refractive spell, too. Strong and tough. The texture is smooth and the structure coherent. Whoever wove that protective spell knew what he was doing."

"So," said the Magus thoughtfully. "Three different spells, involving from one to three different sorcerers."

"I'd say two, Master, though there might be three."

"One black magician and at least one white one, you think?"

"That's the way it smells to me," said the goblin.

"He doesn't know who he is, and hasn't got sense enough to

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care," said MacCullen. "Did you notice his shield? A field sable. In other words, somebody took his escutcheon off and painted the shield black. And that black surcoat he wears. Someone didn't want him to find out who he was, so they got rid of every bit of identification. But if that's the case, why not just kill him and be done with it? There's something very screwy going on here, my dear Frithkin, and I want to get to the bottom of it. Besides which—" He smiled broadly behind his flaming beard. "—if our voided friend is returned to his rightful condition, it is likely that he'll reward us handsomely."

"True, he seems like a good sort," Frithkin said, blinking his great eyes slowly and solemnly. "But how do you know he has enough money to reward us, even if he wants to?"

"His armor, dear boy. Black enamelled, inlaid with gold and with red enamel. Armor like that isn't cheap. It looks pretty dingy now, but that's because he hasn't been able to polish it. Mark my word, that lad has riches in his own right, and if we can help him regain them we'll be well rewarded."

"How do you propose to go about it?" Frithkin asked.

"There are two ways to approach the problem," the Magus said. "We cannot analyze the spells from the evidence obtainable from Sir Empty alone; we need the complete evidence. The rest of what we need can be obtained from only two sources: The knight's body or the sorcerer who enchanted him. We have to find one or the other—preferably both."

"Succinctly put, Master, but it gets us nowhere," said the goblin. "Either one of 'em could be anywhere. We can eliminate Heaven and the Nether Regions, but that still leaves us all Christendom and Faerie to search. And that's an awful lot of territory, Master."

"If we combed it inch by inch, it would be an impossible task, I agree," said MacCullen. "Therefore, we must use our brains. First, the body. No clues there. It could be anywhere, as you say. It could be lying somewhere in a coma, in a vault, say, or even buried somewhere with a protective spell cast on it. Or, it might be working as a slave somewhere —that's a likely idea."

"Why?" asked Frithkin.

"Because all the qualities that the Empty Knight has would be missing from the spirit left in the body; the bravery, the initiative, the ambition, the determination, and part of the intelligence. It would retain the memory, of course, but that wouldn't do it much good. What good is memory if you haven't got

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the ability to put it to use? In that condition, he—whoever he is—would make a fine slave. Especially if he's big and strong, which, judging from the size and build of the armor, he is."

"That narrows it down a bit," the goblin agreed, "but we can't go around checking every slave and serf in Christendom and Faerie."

"Obviously not."

"So that leaves the magician," Frithkin continued. "And we can't go around trying to check every magician in Christendom and Faerie, either."

"True enough," agreed the Magus. "But it so happens that we know where every magician will be in two months' time."

Frithkin slapped the palms of his bony hands together. "The Convention!"

"Precisely. Any sorcerer, magician, warlock, or other practitioner of the Art who doesn't show up at the Convention is automatically deprived forever of his powers, and all his spells are nullified. He'll be there, all right, and our hollow friend can identify him. If he doesn't come, of course, the spell will vanish and we can take credit for that. We can't lose, Frithkin."

"I don't know . . ." the goblin said doubtfully. "That law applies only to mortals, you know. What if the enchanter is one of the Faerie folk, like myself, who just naturally have certain powers, instead of having to study for them, as you mortals do?"

"In that case, we will go directly to King Huon. If any of the Fey are involved, they have violated one of the basic laws of Faerie by using black magic. We will lodge a complaint in Court, and King Huon du Cor will find the culprit for us in a flash."

FRITHKIN looked thoughtful while he downed half a glass of wine, then his mouth spread in a grin until the corners were almost even with his ear lobes. "It might work, at that, Master Magus! Back in the time of King Oberon, you might have had a rough time getting such a case before the Court, but King Huon du Cor has a tendency to be more lenient toward mortals, having been one himself once."

"Really?" said the Magus. "I didn't know that. I'm not up on Faerie history as much as I should be. King Huon was once a mortal?"

"That's right. Used to be Duke of Bordeaux. King Oberon had been promised translation to Paradise, but he had to pick a successor and Huon was his choice. He's made a pretty good King, too."

Magus MacCullen waved a huge hand. "Well, there you are, my good Frithkin! Luck is on our side! Here I have been grip-

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ing because a Convention Year happened to fall during my lifetime. Once every century there is a Convention, and I had to get caught! But now we see that all is for the good. Without the Convention, I wouldn't have but a small chance of catching the Empty Knight's enchanter. Now, it is almost certain!"

"I'm glad you said 'almost', Master," said the goblin.

The Magus scowled. "You're a pessimist, Frithkin. Now let me get some sleep. We have a long way to go yet, and I want to start out fresh in the morning."

"Very good, Master. Have a good night."

"The same to you, good Frithkin. Wake me early, and we'll go down and fetch His Emptiness and be on our way."

Ten minutes later, the red-bearded sorcerer was snoring away, while Frithkin, who slept but once in thirty days, sat silently in the darkness, thinking goblin thoughts.

* * *

Magus MacCullen was dreaming peacefully about refurbishing his home with the money he would get from aiding the Empty Knight when someone shook his shoulder and startled him into sudden wakefulness.

"Sssst! Master Magus!" It was Frithkin's whisper. "Up and out! Wake up!"

Instantly awake, the Magus swung his legs over the side of his bed. "What the Hell's going on?" he whispered.

"I don't know," Frithkin said, "but whatever it is, I don't like it. A minute ago, four men came up the stairway, and they're outside the door right now. Quiet as mice, they were, but they can't fool a goblin's nose."

"Robbers," the Magus muttered. "Is there anyone outside the window?"

Frithkin moved silently to the window and looked out. There was nothing moving in the courtyard fifteen feet below, no one about anywhere. Frithkin whispered that information to MacCullen.

"All right," said the magician, "you get down below, and I'll drop the saddlebags to you. Then I'll come down myself, and we'll get out of here. Move."

The goblin went over the window sill and down the side of the stone wall, his fingers and toes finding handholds that no mortal could have found so quickly—certainly not in the dark. MacCullen dropped one saddlebag and then another, and Frithkin caught them before they struck the flagstones of the pavement. The whole operation was almost as silent as the evening breeze.

Then there was a gleam of light from behind MacCullen, and he spun away from the window. The door to the hall had

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opened, and there was a shaft of firelight from the flickering torch at the head of the stairs.

There were men outside, armed and lightly armored in hauberk and steel cap.

"Come out, Roderick!" shouted one. "Come out cowering like the dog you are!"

"That's not him," said another.

"Nah!" said a third. "That's the red-haired swine who claims to be a magician."

"Might as well get him, too," chimed in the fourth.

They moved into the doorway.

MacCullen knew he couldn't get out the window in time. He'd break his neck trying to climb down fifteen feet before one of these thugs crossed the room. And he certainly couldn't jump for it.

Things looked bad, but there was one consoling fact. They had to come in through that door one at a time, with the light behind them.

Using his quarterstaff like a lance, he charged forward, driving the end of it into the pit of the first man's stomach. The chain mail hauberk could stop a sword's edge, but it wasn't much good against a blow like the one MacCullen gave. The first man collapsed, retching.

The second man tried to get by the first. MacCullen shifted his big hands, and the end of the quarterstaff swung and slammed against the side of his opponent's head, just beneath the rim of the steel cap.

MacCullen aimed another blow at the third man. The man ducked, and the staff hit the steel cap, which came off and spun into the air, landing with a ringing clang. The end of the staff came down on the top of the unprotected head.

MacCullen was just about to congratulate himself on having disposed of three out of four when he heard more noise on the stair. A fifth and then a sixth man appeared. Reinforcements!

With a roar of rage that seemed to shake the walls, Magus MacCullen leaped over the three fallen men and slammed his oaken staff into the middle of the fourth man so hard that he staggered backwards into the arms of the man at the head of the stairwell. The stairs were full of men. MacCullen didn't stop to count, but it looked like a dozen or more. The ones at the top rocked back as their comrade collapsed into their arms.

MACCULLEN heard a movement behind him and ducked to one side just in time. A fist with a club in it came down past his right ear. MacCullen dropped to a crouch and grabbed the wrist. Up and over! The flying mare sent the attacker in a somersaulting arc toward

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the head of the stair. MacCullen noticed in passing that the man had no helmet on. Considering the rap he had been given, he must have had a fairly tough skull.

The arrival of a second body, with considerable momentum behind it, totally upset the already precarious balance of the men at the top of the stairway. They fell backwards.

It was like watching an avalanche.

Or, MacCullen thought, like watching a row of dominoes fall after the first one has been knocked over.

The men on the lower steps could not support the weight of the men falling from above, so they, in their turn, fell, adding more weight to the burden of those below.

Halfway down the steps, the avalanche began to slow as a few of the more quick-witted grabbed for the stair railing and held on.

MacCullen turned and looked at the two fallen men by the door of his room. Neither one seemed inclined to move. He grabbed one by the scruff of his neck and the seat of his hauberk, lifted, turned, and tossed him down the stair. Without looking to see the result, he grabbed the second man and sent him after the first.

The avalanche, prodded by two new arrivals, proceeded on its merry way.

In the gloom at the bottom of the stairs, MacCullen saw that his own reinforcements had arrived. The Empty Knight, brandishing a gigantic mace in one steel gauntlet, was taking care of those who were tumbling to the bottom of the staircase, banging them on the head in order of their arrival. Frithkin was jabbing his quarterstaff between the uprights of the bannister, tripping those who had not yet fallen, and rapping the fingers of those who sought to retain their balance by holding on to the rail.

Regaining his own quarterstaff, which he had dropped when he was attacked from behind, Magus MacCullen charged down the staircase, tumbling men before him.

It was all over before any of the three realized it. MacCullen and the Empty Knight were looking for more heads to knock when they suddenly became aware that all of the available heads had already been so treated.

"One, two, three, four . . ." Frithkin began counting, pointing a long bony finger at one fallen man after another.

"Are you all right, Magus?" asked the Empty Knight.

"Fine. And yourself?"

"Not a one of them touched me," the knight boomed hollowly. "Which is fortunate," he added, "since I don't like to be knocked

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down. How are you, my good Frithkin?"

". . . sixteen, seventeen! I make it seventeen," said Frithkin. "How am I? Oh, fine, my lord. Just fine."

At that moment, the landlady, who had heard all the noise and waited quietly until it was over, flung open the door and said: "Did you get 'em?" Then, seeing only her three guests standing, she froze and turned pale as death.

Frithkin was angry. Goblins do not like fighting; still less do they like to see their mortal masters attacked. He drew a long, wicked-looking knife from beneath his robe and advanced on the woman slowly. "Did *who* get *whom*, Madam?" he asked in his reverberating voice.

The shattered harridan quivered and made strangling noises, but found herself unable to move from the path of the advancing, hooded figure.

MacCullen opened his mouth to speak. He wanted no throats cut this night. But he was too late.

Suddenly, when he was less than four feet from the woman, Frithkin swept back the hood from his head. He bugged out his great, glowing goblin eyes. He opened his huge mouth wide, showing formidable rows of grinding teeth. He stuck out a tongue whose tip came even with the tip of his nose. Then he roared horrendously.

"Arrraghh!"

The landlady rolled up her eyes and collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Grinning, Frithkin put away his dagger and replaced his hood. "I suggest we get out of here, Master, before others come."

"I agree," said the Magus. He tossed a silver piece on the floor near the fainted landlady. "That will take care of everything, though I don't know as she deserves it. Come along, Sir Knight; we have riding to do."

III.

BY the time another six weeks had passed, the Empty Knight was firmly convinced that he had "always" been traveling with the Magus MacCullen and his goblin familiar. His memory of events began to fade after a few weeks, and anything more than a month in the past—unless he was reminded of it regularly—was almost gone completely. This lack of memory never disturbed his placid equilibrium nor his ever-present good humor. The only thing he never forgot was the reason for his quest: the discovery of the magician who had enchanted him.

Other than that one thought, nothing disturbed him. Not even the seeming disaster that oc-

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curred in the third week. The three travelers had spent their nights in various odd places—sometimes in barns of well-to-do peasants, sometimes on the grass of open meadows, sometimes beneath spreading trees. Two or three times, when one was handy, they stayed overnight in an inn—without further trouble. Once, they had spent three days in a castle, fed and lodged well by its genial baron.

On the twentieth day, they were riding through a pleasant wood, shaded from the summer sun by the leaves and branches overhead. There was no road as such; it was easy to go in a fairly straight path between the widely-spaced trees. At noontime, they stopped and, while Magus MacCullen spread out a linen tablecloth, Frithkin unpacked dishes, goblets, wine, and food. The Empty Knight tethered the mules and his great warhorse Roderick to a nearby tree to cool off before they were led to the nearby brook to be watered.

"Nothing like a bottle and a cold bird," said the knight, seating himself on the grass near the tablecloth. "I'm sure I must have enjoyed a repast such as this many times," he added sadly. "I wish I could remember it."

"You'll enjoy it again, Sir Knight," the Magus promised as he tore a leg off a cold chicken. "Pour me some of that wine, Frithkin."

When the meal was finished, Frithkin got out his pipes and began to tootle a goblin tune.

"My good Frithkin," said the Empty Knight when the tune was finished, "do you know 'I Sing of One so Fair and Bright'?"

"Certainly, my lord," said the goblin. "Like this?" He began to play.

"That's it! Begin again, and I'll sing."

Frithkin complied, and the knight sang:

"I sing of one so fair and bright,
"Velùd maris stella,
"Brighter than the noonday light,
"Parens et puella;
"I cry to thee, thou care for me,
"Lady, pray thy Son for me,
"Tam pia,
"That I might come unto thee,
"Maria!"

Magus MacCullen sipped a final goblet of wine while the pleasant baritone of the Empty Knight mingled with the eerie notes of the goblin pipes. When the fifth verse was finished, he clapped his big hands in appreciation. "Well sung, Sir Knight! Well played, Frithkin! And now, let's finish up and be on our way."

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BY this time, they had worked out a routine for themselves. The Magus tidied up the place and packed things in the saddlebags, while Frithkin went to the shallow stream nearby to wash the goblets and plates, and the Empty Knight took the mules and Roderick upstream to water them.

MacCullen heard the drumming of hoofbeats a minute or so later and paused to listen. Then he saw the cavalcade of brightly caparisoned horses and knights in surcoats and armor moving at a fast canter through the trees in the distance. Obviously heading for a ford in the stream ahead, the Magus decided. Then they were out of sight.

A minute or so later, he heard Frithkin's screech. He dropped everything, grabbed his quarterstaff, and went running.

Frithkin had gone to the edge of the stream, and kneeling down, had begun to scrub the greasy plates with the clean, wet sand from the bottom of the stream. He, too, heard the thunder of hooves and lifted his head to look.

The cavalcade rode into sight and splashed across the stream almost where Frithkin was sitting. He sprang to his feet, but just a little too late. One of the horsemen practically ran him over.

Frithkin stepped backwards, slipped on a wet rock, and fell splashingly into the water. The dozen or so knights roared with laughter and kept on riding as Frithkin came up out of the shallow water with a scream of rage. He still held a brass goblet in one hand. Without really taking aim, he flung it at the head of the man who had almost ridden him down. It missed, went sailing by, and hit with a loud clang on the coroneted helm of the man who was obviously the leader of the troop.

The laughter stopped suddenly. So did the horses as the men reined up.

The knight with the ducal coronet turned slowly in his saddle and looked at Frithkin. Then he said, in a snarling baritone: "Sir Griffith, kill me that base-born peasant! Teach him that a commoner does not throw things at the Duke of Duquayne! The rest of you come along. Let Sir Griffith have his sport."

Sir Griffith happened to be the man who had almost run Frithkin down. He evidently enjoyed such witty pranks. As he turned his horse about, Frithkin took off for the woods as fast as his goblin legs would carry him. With a coarse laugh, Sir Griffith set his bay gelding in an easy trot after the scampering Frithkin.

The goblin knew that his only chance was to get up a tree, so

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he headed for the nearest one. But the bay gelding was too fast. One glance behind him told the goblin that he'd never make it high enough to be out of reach of that lance, not in the seconds he had left. He dodged around the tree and headed for another one. The horse had to make almost a right angle turn around the tree, and Frithkin gained a few yards —but not for long. Again he dodged around a tree, but this time Sir Griffith was ready for him and had the horse ready to make that turn. But Frithkin changed tactics, too. He made a complete circle around the tree, crouched, ran under the belly of the horse, and shot off in the opposite direction.

Sir Griffith got his steed turned around, and, with a curse, charged off after the running goblin. The time for sport was over; Sir Griffith was mad now.

Frithkin thought he could make it this time. But he was only eight feet up the trunk of the tree when the lance point got him in the back and went straight through his chest.

Sir Griffith flipped the lance up straight and Frithkin's body flew off in a high arc and crashed down among some bushes.

"Ho!" bellowed a booming, hollow voice. "Base knight! Stand to and fight! Lower your lance against an armored man if you dare, coward!"

The Empty Knight, astride the mighty Roderick, his black shield held at the ready, his lance aimed at the heart of Sir Griffith, charged across the clearing toward his enemy.

SIR Griffith had no choice. He lowered his own lance again, spurred his bay gelding, and charged toward the oncoming figure in black armor.

Magus MacCullen came running up a few seconds before the two met. In one glance, he saw that the Empty Knight should have the better of the encounter. His lance was steady and his aim was true, while the other knight was having trouble holding his aim. The Empty Knight sat a horse better and held his position better. There should have been no doubt of the outcome.

Part of MacCullen's prediction was true. Sir Griffith's lance point slid off the Empty Knight's shield, missing the fesse point by six inches, while the Empty Knight's lance struck solidly, full on.

To the amazement of both Sir Griffith and the Magus, the Empty Knight, still clinging firmly to his lance, came to almost a dead halt. Roderick, who could not stop so quickly, charged on. As a result, the Empty Knight was catapulted backward out of his saddle and came crashing to earth with a clash of steel.

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Sir Griffith, still firmly seated, much to his own amazement, charged on by and then wheeled his horse to attack the fallen knight. But he reckoned without the great black stallion.

Roderick reared his mighty bulk into the air and struck with his forefeet. His heavy hooves struck. One hit the armored Sir Griffith, jarring him to his teeth. The other hit the bay gelding.

That was enough for the gelding. He took one look at that huge stallion, turned, and took off at a gallop. Sir Griffith had dropped the reins and could do nothing to control his horse. It was all he could do to hang on.

Great Roderick thundered along behind and would have caught the bay if he hadn't heard the Empty Knight's voice bellowing behind him.

"Roderick! Come back here!" He knew that if the horse kept on Sir Griffith's heels he would eventually have the whole troop of the Duke's men to deal with.

Roderick came back, his nostrils snorting angrily.

Sir Griffith regained the reins and finally got the bay gelding under control, but he decided not to go back. He had done as the Duke had ordered and had unhorsed the knight in black in the bargain. He had won, hadn't he? Besides, he felt safer with the troop.

The Empty Knight had leaped to his feet and was ready to remount Roderick and ride after the fleeing Sir Griffith, but Magus MacCullen yelled: "Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

"After that catiff swine! He's murdered Frithkin! I loved that goblin like a brother!"

"Wait a minute! There's a dozen of them! They can't kill you, but they'd knock you to pieces and scatter your armor all over the place. What do you mean, he murdered Frithkin? Don't be ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous am I?" bellowed the Empty Knight in a high dudgeon. "Come over to these gorse bushes and take a look! Caught him right in the chest from behind!"

The Magus ran over to the bushes, reaching them before the knight did. "Frithkin! Frithkin! Are you hurt?"

"Damn right I am," said Frithkin feebly from the bushes.

The Magus parted the bushes and looked in. "What happened?"

Frithkin lay still, his hands over his chest, his body twisted, his goblin eyes glazed with pain. "He ran me through. My neck's broken, and so's my back. I think my head's busted."

The Empty Knight looked down at the goblin. "You're still alive, good Frithkin?" He paused, then said in a wondering voice. "And no blood?"

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"Of course he's still alive," said MacCullen. "You can't kill an earth elemental. And who ever heard of a goblin with blood?"

"That's right, my lord," said the goblin with a feeble grin. "It'll take all night to heal, but I'll be all right in the morning." Then he winced. "Being immortal is all right, I guess, but dammit, this sort of thing *hurts*!"

Frithkin was obviously in great pain. "Help me get him out of there, Sir Knight," said the Magus. "Careful, now! Easy! There! Now let's get busy and bury him."

"But he's not dead," protested the Empty Knight, reasonably enough.

"No," said MacCullen patiently, "but that's the best way to cure an earth elemental of anything that's wrong with him. Put him in the earth."

"Aye," muttered Frithkin with a faint attempt at a smile. "It's back to the Auld Sod for me!"

They dug the grave and buried Frithkin. And all that afternoon the magician and the knight discussed in angry tones what they would do with the recreant knight when they caught him.

"I'll know his coat of arms when I see it again—a row of four red diamonds across a silver shield," said the Empty Knight.

MacCullen nodded. "Argent in fesse four fusils gules. We'll find out who that butcher is all right!"

They talked until the moon rose, then Magus MacCullen lay back on the grass and fell into fitful slumber. The Empty Knight sat up and tended the fire, having nothing else to do.

Just before dawn, he heard a scrabbling, digging noise and looked over at the grave. Frithkin was digging his way out. He stood up, brushed the crumbs of soil from himself, then looked over at the Empty Knight and grinned. "Good as new, my lord."

"I'm glad, good Frithkin," the knight said simply. "Very glad."

Three weeks later, they had reached the border of Faerie.

IV

THE curious dimensional interface which constituted the "border" of the Land of Faerie was not always easy to find. It was computed by astrologers who knew their business that Faerie would drift further and further away until at last the interface would no longer exist, and knowledge of the Land of Faerie would fade from the memories of men and the stories of Faerie would be discounted as childish twaddle. "Nothing but a Faerie story," would become a catch phrase until, after cycles of time, the drift reversed itself and Faerie came once again within the ken of mortal men.

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For Frithkin, finding the exact location of the borderland was childishly simple; as a subject of the Faerie King, he had a homing instinct that was infallible. The goblin took the lead, followed by Magus MacCullen and the Empty Knight, and they threaded their way through a thick forest of gnarled, ancient oaks. The sky was shrouded with a light overcast, and the light filtered down through the leaves and branches to fill the air with greenish gloom.

There was danger here, for trolls, dragons, basilisks, and other horrendous denizens of Faerie often found their way through the border and lurked in wait for travelers—especially during a Centennial Convention year, when so many would be coming this way.

The Empty Knight had wanted to ride up front, by Frithkin—to protect them, he said—but Magus MacCullen would have none of it.

"They're more likely to sneak up on us from behind, anyway, Sir Knight," he said. "You'll be of much more use in the rear. And if anything happens, for the love of Heaven use your mace or your sword, not your lance."

Mollified by having been put in the position of what the Magus said was of greatest danger, the Empty Knight rode behind.

As a further precaution against danger, MacCullen had previously conjured up a series of spells ready for casting should the occasion arise. The real reason he wanted the Empty Knight in the rear was that if a dragon, say, were to challenge them from ahead, the knight would most likely lower his lance and charge from force of habit. And, of course, get knocked out of his saddle as a result.

He had explained the whole thing to Frithkin on the day after the attack by Sir Griffith.

"He's strong enough and skilled enough, but he doesn't have the weight behind him. Oh, he *looks* heavy enough, but that's because we tend to think there's a man inside that armor. There's a common rumor, among peasants who don't know any better, that a knight in full armor can't get up again if he's knocked flat. The heaviest plate armor made doesn't weigh over ninety pounds, and any knight that can't get to his feet, with only ninety pounds of armor distributed evenly over his body, doesn't deserve to wear it.

"Now, Sir Empty's armor is fairly heavy, but it isn't of the heaviest kind. He doesn't weigh more than eighty pounds—eighty-five at the most. What chance does he have of driving his lance point home? How can he unhorse a man who, with armor, weighs close to two hundred and fifty pounds?"

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"I see," Frithkin had said. "I remember when that ba—er, gentleman was chasing me, I wished I were a rock elemental—a gnome or a kobold. No fear of lances, then! A friend of mine named Gwuthnik is a little gnome who stands three feet high if he stretches, weighs a good four hundred pounds, and he's so hard that a lance point wouldn't do more than scratch him."

"Four hundred pounds, eh?"

"Since he's a rock elemental, I should have said he weighs close to twenty-nine stone."

A MACE or a sword was something else again, MacCullen decided. A mace has weight of its own and a sword has a sharp edge and you don't depend so much on your own weight to wield them. Besides, the Empty Knight could hold on to the pommel of his saddle with one gauntlet while he used a sword or mace with the other.

Nevertheless, the Magus had charged himself up with a horde of good spells, just in case.

They came to a bridge over a wide, sluggish stream, and Frithkin stopped, his nose twitching. "Smells all right to me," he said after a moment. "Come along."

They went on across the stone bridge, but the Magus and the Empty Knight kept a sharp watch all the same. There was, as far as anybody knew, no reason for trolls to prefer bridges to hide under, but they did. Fortunately, none had discovered this particular bridge. The three travelers crossed without incident.

There was no precise moment when the interface was crossed. The border of Faerie was like any other border; unless it has been marked out by a surveyor and clearly marked, there is no way of knowing at which precise moment the border is passed. But one minute the three were in the mortal world—and a few minutes later they knew they were in Faerie. It was hard to tell how they knew. Partly it was the luminous appearance of everything; the colors of grass and leaf and flower seemed to have a fluorescent quality about them. And the quality of the light itself was different. Since the sky had been overcast before they crossed the border, the change in the sky had not been obvious, and the leafy branches overhead made it even more difficult to tell, but all three knew that the sun was gone. The sun never shines in Faerie; there is only the blue of the sky, a darkling blue which permeates the very air with a silvery twilight.

After an hour or so, the heavy forest began to thin out. The trees were still as big, but there was more room between them. The place might have been a well-tended park instead of a woods.

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If nothing else, the Faerie folk took care of their countryside.

"How does this place smell to you, Frithkin?" the Magus asked.

The goblin tilted back his head and tested the air with his nostrils. "All right," he said. "Nothing dangerous. There's a griffin several miles to the south, but he's digesting a meal, not hunting."

"Fine. Let's take a rest, then. Unpack some sandwiches. And some beer. Be sure to take the cold spell off the beer or we'll chill our insides when we drink it."

Frithkin narrowed his eyes—as much as he could narrow those huge orbs—and said: "Where are you going?"

"For a walk. I'll be back in a few minutes."

WITHOUT waiting for an answer, he got down off his mule and strode off through the woods until he was well out of sight of the goblin and the Empty Knight. Then he walked over to the nearest oak, traced a peculiar symbol in the air, murmured three lines of potent verse, and knocked briskly on the tree.

"Who is there and what do you want?" said a contralto voice from the tree.

"Let's not play guessing games, my lady," he said; "I am the Magus MacCullen, as you well know. You and your sisters have been keeping a watch on us for a long time. I'm not a magician for nothing, you know."

"Very well, Magus MacCullen," said the voice, sounding rather miffed. "What is it you want?"

"Who is the Elder Sister in this grove?" MacCullen asked.

"It so happens that I am. Now, what do you want?"

"I thought my intuition was working pretty well," said MacCullen. "Picked you out right away."

"What do you want?" The voice sounded angry.

"I said, let's not play guessing games, my lady. You know what I want. Information. But if you want to play another kind of game, I have one for you."

"Which is?"

"First I tell you a story, then you tell me one."

"It had better be a good story," said the voice. "I'm not in a mood for games."

"Oh? I thought you were. Well, I'll do my best to interest you. First, I will begin my story by reminding you that it is against the Law of Faerie for any of the Faerie folk to fall in love with a mortal."

There was a gasp from the tree. Then the voice said: "Go on, Magus."

"Fine. Now, we will mention no names. We both know what we're talking about, don't we?"

"Yes, Magus."

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"Thank you, my lady. Then I shall say that I know what your sister did and I think it was very good of her. I want to help. I know that she partially averted a very serious crime, a breaking of both the laws of Faerie and the laws of Christendom. In order to set right that situation, I am willing to overlook a small infraction of the law, such as falling in love. More; with your help, I am willing to aid and abet this minor misdemeanor." He was bluffing. Most of what he was saying was guesswork, but it was guesswork based on knowledge and observation.

"Do you swear by the Most Holy?" the voice asked.

"I swear by His Name," replied the magician.

"I believe you, Magus. I know you to be a good man. We would not want to get our sister in trouble. Though I don't know how you knew."

"Someday I'll tell you," the Magus promised, "but there are more ears in this grove than ours." Again he mentioned no names, but the air elementals were notorious for spreading gossip.

"I don't think there are any of the wind sprites about just now," said the voice, "but let's keep it confidential, as you say. Now, Magus, I honestly don't know all the details. None of us do. Other information I am forbidden to give. What I tell you now is all I *can* tell you. Ask no further questions."

"All right, my lady. I'll do the best I can with what I have to work with. Speak on."

"Very well. You have heard of the Great Chalice?"

MacCullen raised his red eyebrows in surprise. "I have. Don't tell me *that's* mixed up in this."

"It is."

THE Magus pursed his lips for a silent whistle. The Great Chalice was the symbol of the Kings of Faerie. Whoever rightfully owned it was, by law, King of Faerie. It could not be stolen or taken by force; each King had to give it willingly to his successor. To mortals, it conveyed immortality; to all, it gave the power to rule Faerie.

"Someone is after it," said the voice from the tree. "I don't know any of the details of the plot, but if you solve it, you will solve your own difficulties and ours as well. Now, the man to watch is the Duke of Duquayne!"

"*That* son of—Pardon me, my lady. I have no love for the Duke; he ordered one of his knights to run through my familiar."

"Sounds like him," said the tree. "The point is, you have to get to King Huon's court before he does, and he's three days ahead of you. We were going to use subtle pressures and mis-

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guidance to get you to take the shortcut, but now that won't be necessary."

"The shortcut. You mean across the Blistering Desert?"

"Exactly. If you take the long way round, the Duke will be at King Huon's court before you."

"But nobody can carry enough water to cross that desert and live!"

"Arrangements have been made. Go directly to the edge of the desert from here. You will find a golden ring in the sand. We had arranged things so that you would find it accidentally, but there's no need of that now. With it, you will be allowed to ask for water three times as you cross the desert. Three times only, so don't waste your requests. Do you understand?"

"I understand, my lady."

"That is all, Magus MacCullen. I can tell you no more. Further, I bind you to say no word of this to anyone."

"I cannot promise that, my lady. The goblin Frithkin is my familiar; we have no secrets each other."

"You may tell Frithkin when you judge the time is ripe. But no one else. Above all, not to the one you call the Empty Knight."

"Who is he, my lady?" the Magus asked. "Do you know?"

"I said no questions. But . . . I'll answer that one and no more. No. None of us knows. We suspect, but that is not enough. But the signs tell us that you will discover his identity."

"That's all I need to know, then. Thank you, my lady."

"Thank *you,* Magus MacCullen. May God go with you."

V

LOOK here, Master Magus," said Frithkin pleadingly; "I'm not asking for my own sake. Lack of water makes me wither up, but I could still make it across that desert. So could his lordship, here. But you need water. And what about the mules and Roderick?"

"Don't you trust me, Frithkin?" the Magus asked gently.

"Yes, Master! Of course, but —" He clamped his lips together for a moment and looked out over the sandy waste that stretched before them. "Well, then, let's go, Master. Whatever you say."

"What about you, Sir Knight?" MacCullen asked.

"Lead on, Magus. I follow," the knight said boomingly.

Magus MacCullen had been surveying the edge of the desert. It began abruptly, as though a knife had been drawn across the landscape. On one side there was grass, on the other side, rock and sand. There was no heat from the sun, for there was no sun, only the blue sky overhead. But the sands of the Faerie desert were

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hot, and it was said that the fires of Hell itself were near the surface here.

Then MacCullen saw what he had been looking for. Something gleamed in the sand at the desert's edge, a few feet away. He couldn't have missed it, even if he had not known it would be there. He stooped, picked up a handful of sand, and let it run through his fingers. When the sand was gone, the ring remained in his palm. He got up on his mule, then, and said: "Let's go. We have a long ride ahead of us, and we must make good time."

All that day they plodded across the Blistering Desert. The hooves of the animals had been wrapped with cloth to protect them from the heat of the sand, which would have blistered their hooves in time.

Night came. The sky darkened to a royal blue, and a glimmer of light appeared on the horizon. Faerie has no sun, but its moon, three times the size of the moon mortal men were used to, was always full and shone with a yellowish light.

At midnight, when the moon was overhead, they stopped to rest the animals. The Magus conjured up a cold spell that chilled the sands for a little while so that he and the mounts could lie down without getting feverish from the sand's heat. When the moon sank in the west, and the sky lightened again, they all rose and went on.

At midday, Frithkin said: "Well, Master Magus, that's the last of the water." He had just given a drink to the mules and Roderick. The leathern water bag was empty.

"Well, we must do something about that," said Magus MacCullen. He put his hand in the pocket of his blue-and-silver robe and muttered something.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, nearby, two small whirlwinds began to form. They whirled faster and grew taller, until they had become whirling cones of sand nearly as tall as a man. Then they changed shape subtly, and the spinning sand took the form of two girls, tan and shapely.

"Sand sprites," muttered Frithkin. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

THE sprites said nothing. There was only the swishing sound of the little whirlwinds that held them together. Their arms were uplifted to the sky, and their writhing fingers became long and tenuous and seemed to reach upward to the sky itself.

Where a mortal woman would have had feet, the sand sprites had only twisting whirls of sand. The spinning winds had lifted

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the sand grains that formed their bodies from the desert itself, leaving a shallow depression in the desert floor. Their hands, reaching higher and higher, found what they sought. They brought water down from the clouds themselves, letting it flow through the interstices in their granular bodies and spreading it like a blanket on the ground below. Within minutes, the depression was full of cool water.

The two sand sprites, their work done, whirled away to a point several yards distant. The winds slowed. Stopped. The sand that had made up their bodies collapsed and became two ordinary piles of sand, like any other little dunes in the desert.

"You never cease to amaze me, Master," Frithkin said thoughtfully, studying MacCullen's face. He knew perfectly well that sand sprites cannot be commanded to do anything, except perhaps by the King of Faerie himself. There was more to this than met the eye. But he said no more.

"That pool will warm up and evaporate pretty quickly," said MacCullen. "Fill up the water bags; let the animals drink. Then I'm going to take a bath and wash off the mules and Roderick."

"I hope you can do that trick again," said Frithkin. "We're only a quarter of the way across this desert."

"We'll make it, Frithkin," the Magus said shortly.

"I never doubted it, myself," said the Empty Knight complacently. "If Magus MacCullen says he'll do a thing, he does it."

"That's true, my lord," said Frithkin. "He always comes through. But sometimes I wonder *how*."

It took the travelers four days to cross the Blistering Desert. Twice more, at MacCullen's call, the sand sprites brought them water. They were just running short of the last of it when they reached the other side. The moon had just set and the Faerie dawn had brightened the sky.

As they crossed the edge and their mounts trod on grass again for the first time in four days, Magus MacCullen quietly flipped the gold ring behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a small swirl of sand surround it and it was gone.

"Thanks," said the Magus in his softest voice.

"You are welcome, Magus MacCullen," whispered a dry, slightly gritty voice in his ear.

Three days later, weary but pleased with themselves, the three travelers arrived at the Nameless City near which stands the great white castle of King Huon du Cor, the Sovereign Ruler of Faerie. They were fully a week ahead of time. And, since they had gained six days by tak-

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ing a shortcut across the Burning Desert, they should be three days ahead of the Duke of Duquayne instead of three days behind.

"Now what do we do?" asked Frithkin.

"Do?" said the Empty Knight. "Why we go straight to the Palace, of course, and announce ourselves."

"Not just yet," said the Magus. "Let's not be too hasty. I want to look things over first. Is there a good reliable inn within the City gates, Frithkin?"

"Several. We're still solvent, Master Magus; how good a suite do you want?"

"Roomy, but nothing too showy. Not the best in town, certainly."

"You don't want the Queen Titania, then. How about the Hermes Trismegistus? A reliable place, and they cater to the magician trade, anyway."

"They'll be all booked up for the Convention, won't they?" the Empty Knight asked.

The goblin grinned and shook his head. "You're in Faerie now, my lord, and any Faerie Inn always has room for one more."

"All right," said the Magus. "We'll go there. And then I want you to scout around and find out what the news is, if any."

THEY went through the gates of the Nameless City, and through streets filled with shops and stores of all kinds. The people in the unnaturally clean streets were of all kinds and descriptions. Besides the near-human folk, who differed only by their pointed ears and their pale, translucent skin, there were goblins and gnomes and elves and brownies, and some odd-looking folk that even the Magus didn't recognize.

They got a suite of rooms at the Hermes Trismegistus, and Frithkin went out to search for news. He returned in the middle of the afternoon.

"Not much in the way of news Master," he said. "The Duke of Duquayne hasn't arrived yet. I checked with the guards at the City gates and with the guards at the Palace. No sign of him, though he's been invited to stay at the Palace by the King himself."

"I don't understand it," the Magus said musingly. "The Duke and his troop aren't magicians. Or are they? Why should they be coming to Faerie at Convention time?"

"Oh, didn't you know? There's to be a tourney. Jousting and mock battles and everything. A big show that His Majesty is putting on for the entertainment of the visiting magicians. There'll be the usual prizes: A gold cup for the winner and a gold medal for the runner-up,

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plus lots of silver medals and ribbons for the others."

"By George!" said the Empty Knight enthusiastically, "I must enter!"

Frithkin grinned.

But Magus MacCullen nodded in agreement. "Indeed you must, Sir Knight! Indeed you must! Here—" He reached into his belt pouch and brought out a silver piece. "—go down to the nearest armorer and get yourself a polish job. If they ask why you want the armor left on, give 'em your story about the vow. Make sure they do a good job, too. We want you to shine for this affair."

The Empty Knight stood up and took the silver piece in his gauntlet. "You've been very good to me, Master Magus," he said solemnly. "I shall repay you as soon as I come into my own"

"Think nothing of it. Now go down and get that polish job."

As soon as he was gone, Frithkin said: "What's got into you, Master? You know he won't last a minute in the first bout."

"Frithkin, let me do the worrying, will you? Here's another silver piece. Go down and get me a can of gold paint, a can of red paint, and a can of black paint. The quick-drying kind that isn't available outside of Faerie. And a brush and some solvent. Got it?"

"I've got it, but . . ."

"Go, Frithkin, go! I want you back here in fifteen minutes."

When Frithkin came back with the paint, he saw that MacCullen had very carefully cleaned the surface of the knight's shield.

"I am afraid to ask what you are up to, Master," said Frithkin.

"Then don't! Go to the public room and drink some beer or something! Come back when you're not so inquisitive."

Rather hurt, Frithkin did as he was told. He still had change from the silver piece, so he spent the next half hour drinking beer as he had been told. But his curiosity finally got the better of him, and he went back upstairs.

"There!" said MacCullen as soon as Frithkin opened the door. "How do you like it?"

Frithkin stared at the shield. It had been painted red, with a black chevron, like the letter A without the cross-bar, coming up to the center. Under this black inverted V was a round, gold disc, and there were two more on either side and just above the chevron.

Frithkin just stood there, open-mouthed.

"I know," MacCullen said gently, "you're going to say that I can't do that. Putting my older brother's arms on another's shield is a violation of the laws of heraldry, chivalry, and common decency. Well, you are perfectly right." He reached out

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and touched the shield. "It's dry now. Good. You win, Frithkin. I repent me of my actions."

And he took the brush and the black paint and painted the whole thing over black.

VI

THE next day, the three travelers rode up to the Palace gates and asked to be admitted.

"You names and ranks, please," said the Captain of the Guard.

"I am the Magus MacCullen, Sorcerer of the Seventh Circle. This is my familiar, Frithkin, a subject of His Fey Majesty. This gentleman is a knight of noble birth who wishes to remain anonymous for the time being. He has taken a vow."

"You vouch for him, Master Magus?"

"I do."

"Sign here. Thank you. You may pass."

Others had come early, too. Around the great jousting field, several silk pavilions, blazing with the colors of their owners' coats-of-arms, had already been erected.

"Let's go on out there and pick a spot to put up our own tent," said Magus MacCullen with a chuckle. "Five will get you a hundred that there will be a herald along before the pavilion is up five minutes."

"No takers," said Frithkin. "Five will get you a hundred that —" He stopped. "No, no bet. I was going to say that they'll make us take it down in five more minutes, but you've got something up your sleeve."

"How often does a magician hear *that*?" the Magus asked rhetorically. "But this time you happen to be perfectly right. Let's go."

Frithkin was perfectly right, too, in not betting either way. The Magus had sunk nearly all the money he had left in buying the big black silk tent that they put up, and four minutes after they had finished tightening the guy ropes, a gentleman in a herald's costume came by to investigate. The Empty Knight and Frithkin were inside the tent, rolling down the sides to insure privacy, but the Magus was standing outside. The gentleman in herald's costume walked all the way around the pavilion, then came over to MacCullen. He was short, with gray hair around a balding head, and had a rather mild smile on his face. Only the pointed ears and the fathomless sea-green eyes, which had no pupils, indicated that he was of Faerie stock. "Pardon me," he said gently, "I am Argent Wyvern Pursuivant. You are the Magus MacCullen?"

"I am, sir."

"It is a pleasure to meet you,

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Magus. The record of your distinguished family is well known to us here in Faerie."

Distinguished, but poor as churchmice, MacCullen said to himself. Aloud, he said: "It is good of you to say so, Argent Wyvern."

"Now, I understand," the Pursuivant went on, "that one of your companions is a knight who wishes to remain anonymous."

"That is correct. I vouched for him at the gate."

"Yes, yes, of course. But you can't put up a pavilion unless you intend to enter the tournament, and I can't permit anyone to enter the tournament unless I know his rank and status. Your friend can't remain anonymous if he wishes to enter the tourney. The others have a right to know that they are jousting against one of noble blood and not a—er—commoner."

"Of course they do," said the Magus, as though he were pondering the situation. "Ah! I think I see a way around this. Would it be possible for me to have a short audience with His Majesty?"

"Well-l-l . . . perhaps. I would have to arrange it through my superior, the Faerroi King of Arms, since it is a heraldic matter."

"Excellent. You see, the knight of whom we are speaking is under a vow not to reveal his identity. I, too, am unable to tell you who he is. But there are a few bits of information I *can* give—only to His Majesty, of course."

"What sort of information?" asked Argent Wyvern.

The Magus smiled. "Without breaking my vow, I can tell him what coat of arms lies under the coat of black paint on my friend's shield."

Argent Wyvern Pursuivant broke into a knowing smile. "Ah! That, of course, would solve the problem completely. I shall make arrangements, Magus."

"Thank you, Argent Wyvern."

AN hour later, Magus MacCullen was in audience with His Sovereign Majesty, Huon, King of Faerie, and his chief herald, the Faerroi King of Arms. After making a low bow and going through the usual amenities, MacCullen waited for the King to speak.

"Magus," said King Huon, "what's all this about an anonymous friend of yours?"

The Magus explained, giving the story about the vow, which was perfectly true, as the Empty Knight had said, but misleading.

"So you see, Sire," MacCullen finished, "he does not want his identity revealed to anyone just at the moment."

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"Then he can't fight," said the King. "Right, Faerroi?"

"Quite, Your Majesty," the herald agreed.

"If Your Majesty were to issue a statement saying that you guarantee that the Black Knight is of blood noble enough to engage the others without their losing their honor, wouldn't that suffice?"

"Why, certainly," said the King. "But how can I do that if I don't know who he is?"

The Magus looked at Faerroi King of Arms. "Without breaking my word, I can blazon for you the achievement beneath the black paint on the Black Knight's shield."

The Faerroi King of Arms smiled. "Aha! What is it?"

"This must remain secret."

"Certainly."

"The shield is blazoned thus: Gules a chevron sable between three bezants—the whole debruised by a field sable."

"Only temporarily, I hope," said the herald.

"Gules a chevron sable between three bezants," King Huon repeated. "That's—"

"The Red MacCullen," said the King of Arms, who knew the coat-of-arms of every knight in Christendom and Faerie. "Head of the Clan MacCullen and older brother to the here present Magus MacCullen."

"The Red MacCullen! Why, his deeds are famous! One of the greatest knights in Christendom!" said King Huon.

"I shall be happy to tell my brother that you speak so highly of him, Sire," said the Magus, making a resolve to do so then next time he was home.

"He hasn't gone in much for tournaments, though," King Huon observed. "In fact, he has not done much of anything in the past five years."

"A matter of money, Your Majesty," said MacCullen. "I admit it for your ears only. It would be convenient for the family coffers if the Black Knight were to win a few ransoms of armor at this tourney."

"Ah, that's the Irish, all right," said King Huon. "Brave but poor. Very well, Magus. I will give my Royal Word that the Black Knight is of noble birth, that no man's honor would be sullied by a bout of arms with him."

"Thank you, Sire," said MacCullen with a low bow.

And that was that. As he left, MacCullen sighed with relief. He had managed to get what he wanted without telling one single lie.

TWO days later, Magus MacCullen was having a less formal audience with His Majesty. The King had invited MacCullen and several other magicians who

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were early arrivals to an informal talk over a few glasses of mulled wine. MacCullen was being polite but saying very little. He left most of the talking to the others. He had some heavy thinking to do. There were still parts of this puzzle he did not understand.

One of the sorcerers, a Magus Ponzoni, was holding forth on the possibility of making a spell that would prevent Faerie gold from disappearing when touched by cold iron, when the door opened and a liveried servant approached the King. He whispered something in the King's ear. The King smiled happily. "Bring him in! Bring him in, by all means!" As the servant left, His Majesty turned to the eight magicians and said: "Gentle Magi, there is a friend of mine coming to whom I would like to present you. An old friend, whom I haven't seen for several years. He has come here to take part in the tournament, and that should make it a spectacle worth watching."

At that moment, a tall, handsome man, with jet black hair and a jet black, neatly trimmed beard, entered the room. He stopped and bowed low. "Your Majesty, it is a pleasure to see you again."

"My dear Duke!" said His Majesty. "Permit me to present to you some of our guests." Each of the magicians was named; each made a proper bow to the Duke. MacCullen watched narrowly, but the Duke showed no reaction when the King said: "Magus MacCullen."

And MacCullen was not at all surprised when the man turned out to be the Duke of Duquayne.

"My lord King," said the Duke when the introductions were over, "I am the bearer of unhappy tidings. There is a demon loose in your realm."

The King shot to his feet. "*What*? I shall complain to His Satanic Majesty at once! This sort of thing cannot be tolerated!"

"Your pardon, Majesty," said the Duke hurriedly. "My terminology was inexact. I should have said 'a fiend in human form'. A murderer and an impostor. A butcher of the worst sort. I, myself, saw him run down and kill a defenseless peasant, and there are other crimes against him which I can testify to. I have been unable to apprehend this monster thus far, but with your help it can be done. I happen to know that he is already within the borders of Faerie and is less than three days behind me."

"His name?"

"I don't know his name, Your Majesty. He gives none. But he wears black armor—which the base-born cur has no right to—

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and rides a black horse. A horse named, of all things, Roderick."

King Huon's face clouded over and he glanced at MacCullen, who looked as innocent as possible. The King looked back at the Duke.

"Three days behind you? Are you certain of that?"

"Quite certain, Your Majesty."

"Ah. I was worried for a moment. You see, we already have a knight here answering to that description. But I happen to know who he is, and he is neither base born nor a murderer. And his horse is called—" He glanced at MacCullen.

"Black Beauty," MacCullen said complacently. He had distinctly heard Frithkin call Roderick a black beauty. No lie there.

"Yes, Black Beauty," said the King. "Besides, this man has been here for three days now."

"Then he couldn't be the man we are looking for," said the Duke firmly. "But steps must be taken against the murderer."

"Have no fear, my friend," said the King. "Orders will be issued immediately. Your word is good enough for me. If he is found, he will be hanged instantly from the nearest tree."

"You will rid your realm of a monster," said the Duke. "Perhaps my own men could aid in the search. I would have taken him myself before this, but I have no right to do so in your realm."

"Very proper of you," said the King, "but you should have known that I would have forgiven you."

"You are most kind, Majesty. Oh, by the way, would you ask your men to be very careful not to harm the horse? The stallion belongs to me. It was a gift from a friend, and this cur stole it."

"Your horse? Yes, it would be, having your name. Well, we can just add horse stealing to the list of crimes which we shall hang this villain for."

MacCullen sipped quietly at his mulled wine. So the Duke's Christian name was Roderick, eh? The last piece of the puzzle had fallen into place.

The Duke had made a very bad mistake. He had assumed that he had outsmarted everyone.

VII

THE third day of the tournament. For a week, now, the search had been going on for the "murderous villain" who was supposed to be following the Duke, and there had been no trace of him. It was conjectured that a troll or a dragon had disposed of him, since he was supposed to be traveling alone. MacCullen knew what had made the Duke wary of the knight in

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black armor. Sir Griffith de Beauville had heard the Empty Knight call out Roderick's name and had reported the unusual incident.

MacCullen had heard things, too. Duke Roderick of Duquayne was not well-loved in his duchy. In the past year, he had become a tyrant. That explained the attack in the George and Dragon. Those men had evidently thought that "Sir Roderick the Black" was the Duke. He was sorry now that he and the Empty Knight had dealt so harshly with them. Still, what they had attempted to do had been illegal, even if possibly justifiable. Besides, none of them had been killed. The punishment had been light.

MacCullen had been watching each day's jousting with a critical eye, and he saw that Duke Roderick was out to win by fair means or foul.

Well, let him try. The Magus MacCullen had tricks of his own.

"Look here, good Magus," the Empty Knight said on the third day, "why haven't you let me get out there? Am I to sit in this pavilion all through the jousting?"

"No, Sir Knight, you fight today. I have matched you against your old friend, Sir Griffith de Beauville—he of the 'Argent in fesse four fusils gules.' That will qualify you for the final round."

"Ahh-*ha!* I'll slaughter him."

"I'll say you will. Frithkin, have you got that sand ready?"

The goblin chuckled. "All ready, Master Magus."

"Very well. Let's get started. You'll be called in fifteen minutes, Sir Knight."

"What are you going to do?" the knight asked.

"Well, one of the things I'm going to do is give you a head. It will just be a simulacrum, but when the herald asks you to raise your visor, there will have to be a face behind it. I'm going to make you look like my older brother."

"Your brother? But why?"

"Because it's necessary. Besides, I have to give you *some* face, and it is a law of magic that a simulacrum has to be a copy of some living person. It can't be imaginary, and the person can't be dead, do you see?"

"I see. Very well, good Magus. Go ahead."

FIFTEEN minutes later, the Black Knight rode to the lists on "Black Beauty"—who had had a small white blaze painted on his forehead. MacCullen did not want the Duke to recognize the horse too soon.

MacCullen and Frithkin watched expectantly as the two knights, Sir Griffith and the Black Knight, faced each other across the jousting field. They had met in the center, raised

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their visors, and cantered back to the ends of the field.

Now, visors down, they prepared to charge.

The signal was given. The herald dropped his flag. The two great warhorses began to move. Faster and faster they gained momentum until, at the moment of impact, they were hurtling along at a full gallop.

Like the first time they had met, Sir Griffith's aim and poise were not as good as his black-armored opponent. His own spear struck just off the fesse point, while the Black Knight's lance struck dead center.

But this time, it was Sir Griffith who shot out of his saddle as though he had been propelled from a gun. The Black Knight hardly budged in his saddle as his lance cut through Sir Griffith's shield and pierced the armor. Sir Griffith landed crashingly in the sand of the jousting field. He wasn't quite dead, but he would be a very sick man for some time to come.

Frithkin had been avenged.

"Very beautifully done, Sir Knight!" said the Magus as the Black Knight rode back into the pavilion. "Beautifully done! Listen! The crowd is still cheering! How do you feel?"

"Sort of stuffy."

"I don't blame you. Be careful getting down off Roderick. If you slip, I can't catch you."

Slowly and carefully—and somewhat stiffly—the Empty Knight dismounted.

Not really an empty knight any longer, for his armor had been filled with three hundred pounds of sand.

The next day, Magus MacCullen watched the jousting carefully. He was not interested in any bouts except those fought by the Duke of Duquayne.

The Duke was doing quite well, as a matter of fact. He had arranged to take on as many knights as possible on the last day, and he was knocking them over one by one.

Has to be a hero, MacCullen thought to himself. It didn't matter how many he jolted from their saddles; he would have to take on all who challenged him, and if he lost the last one, he lost the tourney. MacCullen was letting him do all the hard work he wanted to do, saving the Not-Quite-Empty Knight for the final round.

The Duke was not a particularly good jouster, though, and it took MacCullen a little while to see why he was winning. If one wasn't looking for it, it would have been easily overlooked. The Duke was using a confusion spell on his opponent's eyes. They saw him just a few inches to the right of where he actually was.

You are in for a surprise, my

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lord Louse, MacCullen thought grimly.

At last, the Duke of Duquayne reigned supreme in the field. No one appeared to challenge him. He rode up to the grandstand, to the King's box.

The herald blew a trumpet.

"If there are no further challenges," he cried in a loud voice, "His Majesty will award the golden cup to His Grace, Duke Roderick of Duquayne!"

"All right, Sir Knight!" MacCullen whispered. "You know what to do! Get out there and do it. And don't forget what I told you!"

"I'll follow your instructions to the letter, Magus," the knight promised.

Then he rode out into the arena and shouted in his booming voice: *"I challenge!"*

DUKE Roderick, who had been about to take the cup from King Huon's hands, looked around at the sound of the voice. "Who *is* that man?" he asked the King. "Or doesn't anyone know?"

"I can assure you, my friend, that he is worthy of your steel."

"Very well. One more."

And the two knights took their positions.

And thirty seconds later, the Duke of Duquayne was lying unconscious on the ground.

As his seconds came out and dragged him off to his pavilion, the Black Knight rode up to the King's box. Again the herald sounded his trumpet. Again challengers were asked for.

And this time there were none.

The King stood up, the golden cup in his hands. "My lord," he said, "you have done well this day. You have defeated the champion. In token of which, I give you this cup."

The Black Knight took the cup in his hands.

Instantly, it changed. Before, it had been a chalice of carved gold. Now, it was encrusted with dazzling gems—diamonds, rubies, sapphires, and emeralds in a coruscating array.

The onlookers gasped. King Huon had, of his own free will, given away the Great Chalice! He was King no longer; he was just Huon du Cor, sometime Duke of Bordeaux.

And then the new King, the Black Knight, did a strange thing.

"Huon of Bordeaux," he said in his booming voice, "I, of my own free will and pleasure, return to you the Great Chalice, symbol and instrument of the Sovereignty of Faerie!" And he put the cup back in Huon's hands. Huon was King again.

MacCullen had been working his way through the silent, shocked crowd to the King's box.

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"My lord King," he said, "perhaps it would be best if you come with me. I can explain this whole thing. It was a plot of the most dastardly kind. Will you come with me to the pavilion of the man who calls himself Duke of Duquayne?"

Dumbfounded, the King could do nothing but follow.

The Duke was just regaining consciousness when the King, MacCullen, and the Black Knight, followed by a score of Royal Guardsmen, entered his pavilion.

"What happened?" he asked feebly. Then his eyes focused on the stern face of the King.

"Yes. That's what I want to know," said the King. "What happened?"

"Permit me to show you, Your Majesty," said the Magus MacCullen. His fingers made intricate patterns in the air, and he constructed, syllable by syllable, a sestine of great power.

And the Duke's face changed. The hard-eyed, wrinkle-faced wretch who lay on the pallet was quite obviously not the Duke of Duquayne.

"The Magus Prezhenski!" said the King. "But he's supposed to be dead!"

"A hoax," said MacCullen. "He wanted everyone to think he was dead. You see, he had to come as Duke Roderick to pull off his plot against the Throne of Faerie. He put an enchantment on the Great Chalice so that you would think it was the prize cup and give it to him. Not content with usurping the place of the real Duke of Duquayne, he wanted to be King of Faerie."

"What did he do with my friend, Duke Roderick?" King Húon asked in a cold voice. "Kill him?"

"No. The Duke had to be alive in order to allow Prezhenski to use a simulacrum of his face." The Magus MacCullen pointed a finger at the Magus Prezhenski. "You have bartered your soul, Prezhenski. You have dealt with His Satanic Majesty and signed away your life in eternity. Shall we call him and tell him to collect, or will you remove the enchantment on the true Duke of Duquayne?"

"I'll remove it!" the frightened Magus Prezhenski quavered. "Give me a chance."

"Very well. And remember, I know as much magic as you and a great deal more. Don't try any trickery."

"I won't! I won't! I promise!" He began moving his fingers and mumbling verses.

And, quite suddenly, the suit of armor which had been the Empty Knight collapsed to the floor of the pavilion.

"What's this?" said the King.

Outside, there was a commotion.

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And then, with Frithkin by his side, in walked the Duke of Duquayne, stark naked except for the horse blanket he had wrapped around him.

"It worked!" he said happily. "It worked, Magus MacCullen! I remember everything!"

"It must be a sort of double memory," the Magus said with a grin. "You should remember being both horse and knight."

"I do! Very odd sensation, I must say."

MACCULLEN started to say something, but he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Prezhenski was muttering and moving his fingers. MacCullen made one gesture, and the evil magician froze, paralyzed.

"I suggest you put that man under arrest, Your Majesty. Duke Roderick, I should like to speak to you later."

It was only an hour later. Prezhenski had been safely locked away, and a team of three magicians had put tight binding spells on him that he could never throw off by himself.

The King, the Duke, and Frithkin listened to MacCullen explain.

"The Empty Knight, you see, could only remember things that were extremely important to him, things that had registered strongly *after* the enchantment. I thought it odd from the first that he couldn't remember his own name, but could remember the name of his horse.

"By the way, Your Majesty, I should like to call it to your attention that you owe the Duke a boon. He gave you back your kingdom. Legally, he could have kept it."

"Really, Magus," the Duke said, "Huon knows I wouldn't do anything like that to an old friend."

"Nevertheless," said the King, "what he says is true. If you have a boon to ask, I will grant it if it is within my power."

"Well-l-l . . ." the Duke began. "You tell him, Magus."

"He wants a pardon for a certain dryand named Naaia," said the Magus. "That was another name he remembered. What happened was this: Prezhenski, using black magic of the blackest kind, transformed Duke Roderick into a horse. A magnificent black stallion. Naaia, as far as I know, must have seen him do it."

The Duke nodded. "We were out hawking together. I trusted him, and he got me in the woods —near a big oak—and . . . well, suddenly I was a horse. I was too confused to think of what to do. He tied me to the tree and went away."

"And Naaia," said the Magus, "didn't know who you were, but she had seen you as a man and had fallen in love with you. She

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came out of her tree and tried to help you. She couldn't reverse the spell, but she could modify it. She partially disembodied your spirit, leaving enough in the horse's body to make a good horse—all the horse sense, as it were—and put the rest into the armor. At least, that way you could go out to find the magician who had wronged you.

"Prezhenski, meanwhile, took your place. He must have been worried, though, when he found that the horse he had tied so well to the oak tree was gone when he came back to get it."

"Magus MacMullen," said Duke Roderick, "I shall never forget what you have done for me. You have saved my dukedom."

"And my kingdom," said King Huon.

"Oh, by the way, Your Majesty," the Magus said, "I want to apologize for misleading you into thinking that the Empty Knight was my brother, but all I asked you to do was give your Royal Word that the Black Knight was worthy of any man's steel—which he is."

"You are forgiven, Magus. And so is Naaia. Do you love the wench, Roderick?"

"I do, Huon."

"Then we'll see if arrangements can be made. And now, I trust I will see you all at the banquet tonight. This is a story that will make good telling for centuries to come. Will you come with me, Duke Roderick? We'll have to find something for you to wear besides that horse blanket. Oh, and, Magus—between us we will decide upon a suitable reward, though we can never pay what we owe."

"Your Majesty," said Magus MacCullen, with a wink at Frithkin, "You once said the Irish were brave but poor. It is within your power to correct that to some extent—without, of course, removing the bravery."

THE END

MOVING?

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Passage To Dilfar

By ROGER ZELAZNY

A day and a night had Dilvish ridden to warn of the coming slaughter, for all hope now rested with Dilfar — and with the horse that carried him there.

WHEN Dilvish the Damned came down from Portaroy they tried to stop him at Qaran, and again at Tugado, then again at Maestar, Mycar and Bildesh. Five horsemen had waited for him along the route to Dilfar; and when one flagged, a new rider with a fresh horse would replace him. But none could keep the pace of Black, the horse out of steel, for whom it was said the Colonel of the East had bartered a part of his soul.

A day and a night had he ridden, to outpace the advancing armies of Lylish, Colonel of the West, for his own men lay stiff and clotted on the rolling fields of Portaroy.

When Dilvish had seen that he was the last man standing in the place of slaughter, he had called Black to his side, hauled himself into the saddle that was a part of him, and cried for an escape. Black's gleaming hooves had borne him through a line of pikemen, their staffs turned aside like wheat, and ringing, as their metal tips touched against his midnight hide.

"To Dilfar!" he had cried, and Black turned at a right angle in his course and carried him up the face of a cliff where only goats can go.

When Dilvish came by Qaran, Black turned his head and said to him: "Great Colonel of the East, they have mined the air and the air beneath the air with the stars of death."

"Can you get by them?" asked Dilvish.

"If we go by way of the posting road," said Black, "I may be able to."

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"Then let us make haste to try it."

The tiny silver eyes which looked out from the space beneath space and contained the hellspecks of starstuff, blinked and shimmered ahead.

They turned off the road.

It was on the posting road that the first rider emerged from behind a boulder and called upon Dilvish to halt. His horse was a huge bay without trappings.

"Draw rein, Colonel of the East," he had said. "Thy men are slaughtered. The road ahead is seeded with death and flanked by the men of Lylish—"

But Dilvish had swept past him without making answer, and the man put his spurs to the bay and followed.

He paced him all that morning, up the road to Tugado, until the bay, who was all a-lather, stumbled and hurled the man to the rocks.

At Tugado, Dilvish found his way blocked by the rider of the blood-red stallion, who fired at him a bolt from a crossbow.

Black reared high into the air, and the bolt glanced off his chest. His nostrils grew, with a sound like the cry of a great bird coming forth from them. The blood-red stallion leapt from the roadway then and into the field.

Black plunged ahead, and the other rider turned his horse and followed.

TILL the sun reached the top of the sky did he give chase, and then the red horse collapsed in a heap of heavy breathing. Dilvish rode on.

At Maestar the way was blocked at the Pass of Reshth.

A wall of logs filled the narrow trail to twice the height of a man.

"Over," said Dilvish, and Black arced into the air like a dark rainbow, going up and across the fortification.

Just ahead, at the ending of the Pass, the rider of the white mare waited.

Black cried out once more, but the mare stood steady.

The light reflected from the mirrors of his steel hooves, and his hairless hide was near-blue in the bright light of noonday. He did not slow his pace, and the rider of the mare, seeing that he was all of metal, backed from out the Pass and drew his sword.

Dilvish pulled his own blade from beneath his cloak and parried a head-cut as he passed the other rider. Then the man was following after him and crying out:

"Though you have passed the stars of death and leapt the barrier here, you shall never make it to Dilfar! Draw rein! You ride a nether spirit who has taken the form of a horse, but you will be stopped at Mycar or Blidesh—or before!"

But the Colonel of the East did

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not reply, and Black carried him on with long, effortless strides.

"You ride a mount which never tires," called out the man, "but he is not proof against other sorceries! Give me your sword!"

Dilvish laughed, and his cloak was a wing in the wind.

Before the day lapsed into evening, the mare too, had fallen, and Dilvish was near by Mycar.

Black halted suddenly as they approached the stream called Kethe. Dilvish clung to his neck to keep from being thrown off.

"The bridge is out," said Black, "and I cannot swim."

"Can you clear it?"

"I do not know, my Colonel. It is wide. If I cannot clear it, we will never surface again. Kethe cuts deeply into the earth."

And the ambushers came sudden forth from the trees then, some on horseback and others on foot, the foot-soldiers bearing pikes; and Dilvish said: "Try."

Black was immediately at full gallop, going faster than horses can run, and the world spun and tumbled about Dilvish as he clung to Black with his knees and his great scarred hands. He cried out as they rose into the air.

When they struck the other bank, Black's hooves sank a full span into the rock and Dilvish reeled in the saddle. He kept his mount, however, and Black freed his hooves.

Looking back at the other bank, Dilvish saw the ambushers standing still, staring at him, then looking down into Kethe, then back up again at him and Black.

As they moved ahead once more, the rider of the piebald stallion fell in beside him and said: "Though you have ridden three horses into the ground, we will stop you between here and Bildesh. Surrender!"

Then Dilvish and Black were far ahead of him, and away.

"They think you are a demon, my mount," he said to Black.

The horse chuckled.

"Perhaps 'twere better an' I were."

And they rode the sun out of the sky and finally the piebald fell, and the rider cursed Dilvish and Black, and they rode on.

THE trees began to fall at Bildesh.

"Deadfalls!" cried Dilvish, but Black was already doing his dance of avoidance and passage. He halted, rearing; and he sprang forward from off his hind legs and passed over a falling log. He halted again and did it once more. Then two fell at once, from opposite sides of the trail, and he leapt backwards, and then forward again, passing over both.

Two deep pits did he leap across then, and a volley of ar-

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rows chattered against his sides, one of them wounding Dilvish in the thigh.

The fifth horseman bore down upon them. The color of fresh-minted gold was this horse, and named Sunset, and his rider was but a youth and light in the saddle, chosen so as to carry the pursuit as far as necessary. He bore a deathlance which shattered against Black's shoulder without causing him to turn. He raced after Dilvish and called out:

"Long have I admired Dilvish, Colonel of the East, so that I do not desire to see him dead. Pray surrender unto me! You will be treated with all courtesies due your station!"

Dilvish did laugh then and made reply, saying:

"Nay, my lad. Better to die than fall to Lylish. —On, Black!"

And Black doubled his pace and the boy leaned far forward over Sunset's neck and gave chase. He wore a sword at his side, but he never had chance to use it. Though Sunset ran the entire night, longer and further than any of the other pursuers, he too, finally fell, as the east began to grow pale.

As he lay there, trying to rise, the youth cried out:

"Though you have escaped me, you shall fall to the Lance!"

Then was Dilvish, called the Damned, riding alone in the hills above Dilfar, bearing his message to that city. And though he rode the horse of steel, called Black, still did he fear an encounter with Lance of the Invincible Armor before he delivered his message.

As he started on the last downward trail his way was blocked a final time, by an armored man on an armored horse. The man held the way completely, and though he was visored, Dilvish knew from his devices that he was Lance, the Right Hand of the Colonel of the West.

"Halt and draw rein, Dilvish!" he called out. "You cannot pass me!"

Lance sat like a statue.

Dilvish halted Black and waited.

"I call upon you to surrender now."

"No," said Dilvish.

"Then must I slay you."

Dilvish drew his sword.

The other man laughed.

"Know you not that my armor is unbreachable?"

"No," said Dilvish.

"Very well, then," he said, with something like a chuckle. "We are alone here, you have my word. Dismount. I'll do so at the same time. Try your blade against me. When you see it is futile, you may have your life. You are my prisoner."

They dismounted.

"You are wounded," said Lance.

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DILVISH cut for his neck, without replying, hoping to burst the joint. It held, however, and the metal bore not even a scratch to tell of the mighty blow which might have beheaded another.

"You must see now that my armor cannot be breached. It was forged by the Salamanders themselves and bathed in the blood of ten virgins . . ."

Dilvish cut at his head and as he had cut at him, Dilvish had circled slowly to his left, so that now Lance stood with his back to the horse of steel, called Black.

"Now, Black!" cried Dilvish.

Then did Black rear high up on his hind legs and fall forward, bringing his front hooves down toward Lance.

The man called Lance turned rapidly about and they struck him on the chest. He fell.

Two shining hoofmarks had been imprinted upon his breastplate.

He moaned softly as he lay there.

"You were right," said Dilvish, "it is still unbreached."

Lance moaned again.

". . . And I could slay thee now, with a blade through the eyeslit of thy visor. But I will not, as I did not down thee fairly. When you recover, tell Lylish that Dilfar will be ready for his coming. 'Twere better he withdraw."

"I'll have a sack for thy head when we take the city," said Lance.

"I'll kill thee on the plain before the city," said Dilvish, and he remounted Black and descended the trail, leaving him there on the ground.

And as they rode away, Black said to him: "When you meet, strike at the marks of my hooves. The armor will yield there."

When he came into the city, Dilvish proceeded through the streets to the palace without speaking to those who clustered about him.

He entered the palace and announced himself:

"I am Dilvish, Colonel of the East," he said, "and I am here to report that Portaroy has fallen and is in the hands of Lylish. The armies of the Colonel of the West move in this direction and should be here two days hence. Make haste to arm. Dilfar must not fall."

"Blow then the trumpets," ordered the king, starting from his throne, "and muster the warriors. We must prepare for battle."

And as the trumpets sounded, Dilvish drank him a glass of the good red wine of Dilfar; and as meats and loaves were brought to him, he wondered once again at the strength of Lance's armor and he knew that he must try its invincibility once more.

THE END

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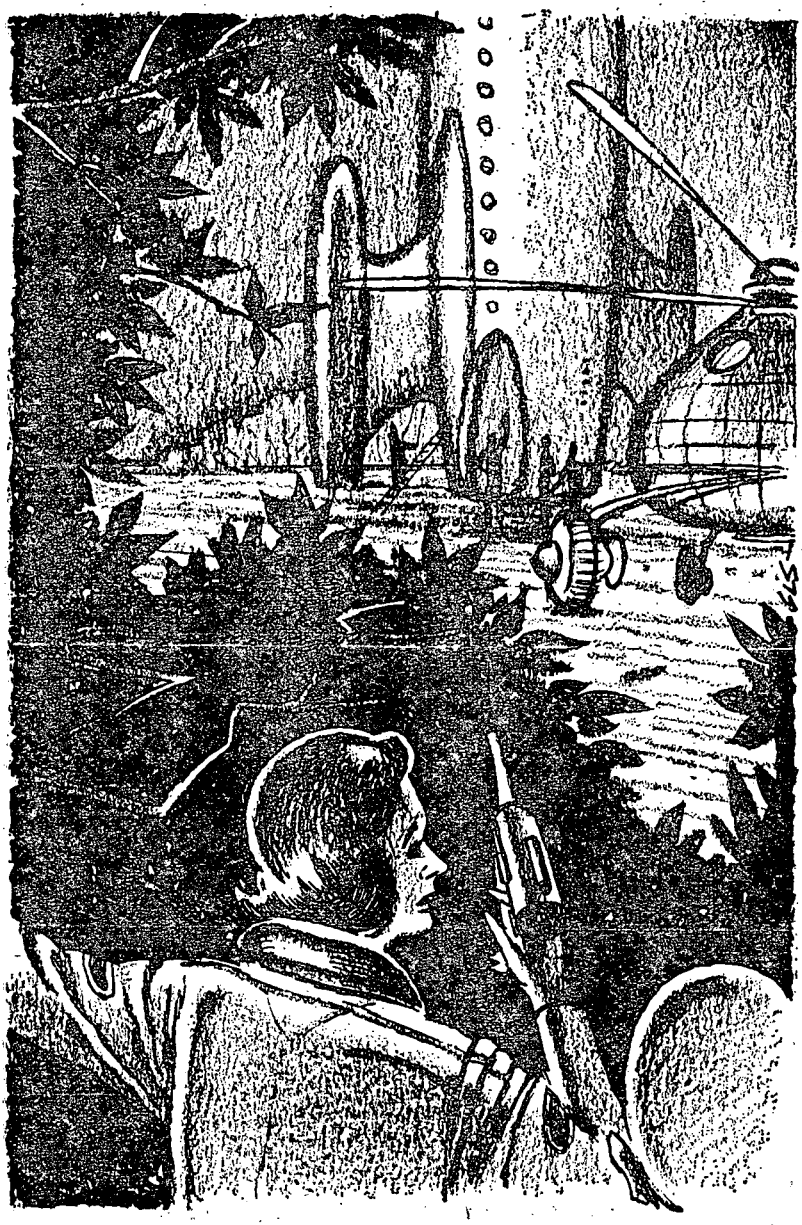

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Conclusion

THE REPAIRMEN OF CYCLOPS

By JOHN BRUNNER

Illustrator Schelling

Synopsis of Part One

In this sector of the galaxy, the Corps Galactica has two chief problems, closely related, and both of them have landed squarely in the lap of GUS LANGENSCHMIDT, *Commandant of the Corps repair, refit, and recreation base on the underdeveloped and predatory world Cyclops.*

Problem one concerns the ZRP's—the Zarathustra Refugee Planets, peopled by descendants of those who escaped the Zarathustra nova 770 years ago. For centuries it was believed that only those who managed to get around the explosion and back towards Sol had escaped; then the planet now known as ZRP One re-contacted civilization and a search revealed that, centuries later, there were more than a score of struggling human outposts cut off from the civilized galaxy.

Little progress having been seen in the galaxy for a long time, a policy of non-interference with the ZRP's was decided on—against strong opposition—in the hope that the new cultures evolving in isolation would help to break the mood of stagnation afflicting galactic society. The Patrol agents of the Corps were assigned to enforce this policy.

Problem two stems from a breach of this non-interference twenty years earlier, when a group of Cyclopeans attempted to enslave the people of ZRP Fourteen and exploit its radioactive deposits. Langenschmidt and MADDALENA SANTOS *frustrated them and the Cyclopeans were dropped down the pit of a volcano by the inhabitants. Cyclopean resentment at this episode has led them to agitate for the repeal of non-interference, as a*

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blow against the Corps' authority, and currently an interstellar conference on the subject is meeting on Cyclops itself; the star delegate is old OMAR HAUST, *himself from ZRP One.*

The matter is further complicated: the planetary budget of Cyclops is only balanced by the revenue the Corps pays for the use of its island base here, and resentment has to take a roundabout means of expression; moreover, the Corps—like all agencies of the galactic government—pays in longevity treatment, not available to the virtual dictator of Cyclops, ALURA QUIST, *who is getting old—and jealous.*

Despite his best efforts, Langenschmidt feels Quist will get her way and the ZRP's will be opened up for crude exploitation. Seeking fresh inspiration, he learns that Maddalena has just completed a tour as an undercover agent on ZRP Thirteen, and sends for her before she leaves for furlough at home on Earth. But he's dismayed to find that long years of frustration have almost convinced her that non-interference is a misguided idea.

At this juncture a notorious figure on Cyclops turns up unexpectedly at the Corps base: JUSTIN KOLB, *a former spaceman who lost his right leg in an accident, was chosen by Quist as her publicly acknowledged lover and built up into a heroic figure, and is now half pet, half gigolo. He's lost his leg again—the same one. Hunting wolfsharks, he had his foot bitten off and was only rescued by the chance intervention of a poor fisherboy,* BRACY DYGE.

The news of his accident reaches Quist as she prepares to entertain her distinguished guests to a banquet preceding her conference. Horrified, she informs the doctor who treated Kolb before, ALEAZAR RIMERLEY. *The doctor is inexplicably appalled to learn that Kolb is in the Corps hospital, the finest on Cyclops, and insists on his being immediately removed. As soon as he can, he contacts his associate* LORS HEIMDALL, *who is posing as a "Receiver of the Sick" on a distant and barbaric planet, to outline an emergency plan which he says they must put into effect.*

The formal banquet goes badly for Quist. Omar Haust gets drunk and denounces her as cynically inconsistent for letting the Corps continue to use its base here while at the same time agitating against the non-interference policy which the Corps enforces. Quist is compelled to make a half-promise about closing down the base, which it would bankrupt Cyclops to do.

Also in trouble is SORAYA, *whose mother is sick with the mysterious incurable disease*

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called "the quakes", and whose boy-friend FIRDAUSI *is urging her to hand the old woman over to the Receivers of the Sick—if they'll accept her—for the usual monetary payment.*

She yields reluctantly to his arguments. But when they apply to the Receivers, the latter refuse to take the old woman, saying she is too old, and shock Firdausi by claiming that Soraya—apparently young and healthy—is herself ill with the quakes. Her they will take, and pay for; they say she's young enough to stand a chance.

The medical officer at the Corps base, ANSTEY NOLE, *hadn't known that Kolb lost the same leg once before. When Langenschmidt tells him, he checks up, because limb-regeneration is costly and difficult even with Corps facilities, let alone what Cyclops can offer. He discovers that the limb isn't regenerated. It's a graft. And a graft must have been taken from somebody.*

Despite interruptions due to Bracy Dyge, who won't waste this unique chance to look over the base and stumbles into places where he shouldn't go, suffering radiation sickness in consequence, they rapidly establish the computer-warranted facts that this tissue isn't from Cyclops stock; that planets making limbs available for grafting are rare, and all distant from Cyclops; and that Earth—most likely source of this particular gene-type—is not one of them, as Maddalena confirms.

Yet if Earth is the most likely source—not the definite source, just the most likely—what exact area of Earth is also most likely? The computer reports that it would be the district anciently known as Iran. Maddalena, struck by an inspiration, reminds Langenschmidt that Irani stock was common on Zarathustra, and at once he sees what she's getting at. The anomalous genetype of this grafted leg well fits the theory that it originated on an unknown ZRP—ZRP Number Twenty-two!

XII

LOOKING slightly dazed, Nole stared at Maddalena while Langenschmidt waited for his communicator connection to be made.

"Number—Twenty-two," he said, as though weighing the statement for some elusive additional meaning. "I'm sorry, but I'm not yet sure what you mean."

"Oh, come now!" Maddalena snapped. "If you weren't so worried about Gus's threat to have your hide for letting the fisher-boy get loose, you'd have seen it before I did. That leg of Kolb's isn't regenerated and it isn't original. So it's got to be either a graft or a synthesized prosthetic.

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You said yourself you didn't know of anywhere the latter technique was being applied, though it's perfectly feasible. So it's almost certainly a graft.

"You said—again—you don't know of any nearby worlds where they make graft material available. Moreover, the computer virtually rules out the chance of a gene-type corresponding to the tissue of the leg occurring on any planet near Cyclops. But it does suggest that the ultimate origin of the ancestral strain might well have lain in the Iran area of Earth.

"At the time when the Zarathustra nova took place, some ten or twelve per cent of the planet's population were of predominantly Irani stock—enough to support their own language as a minority tongue against the pressure of Galactic, and to develop a Zarathustran dialect with Irani admixtures." Maddalena checked. "Stop me, by the way, if I'm ploughing old ground for you."

Nole shook his head quickly. "Candidly, even though at least half the patients who get sent here for major overhaul have been on the ZRP's, I've never really studied the events which led to the present situation."

"You should," Maddalena said grimly. "The ZRP's are the most significant single factor in this sector of the galaxy. But never mind—this'll help me to get my theory straight to my own satisfaction.

"Where was I? Oh yes. Traditions preserved on ZRP One indicate that the incredible number of three thousand ships carrying well over two million people probably managed to lift from Zarathustra—from the night side, which was protected from the fury of the nova by the mass of the planet for several hours after its inception.

"We've located to date twenty-one refugee planets on which people have at least survived, even if only at the most primitive level. But these account between them for a mere ten per cent of the rumored three thousand ships which got away—in fact, just about three hundred and six. On ZRP One, for instance, we know that precisely two ships landed; on Fourteen, only one. On Thirteen, where I've spent two decades, about sixty made landings—the first arrivals left a sub-radio beacon in orbit, and others homed on it. Which was a disastrous mistake; the casualties hit eighty per cent in the first year, and despair overwhelmed the remainder to such a degree they still haven't made a full psychological recovery.

THE essential point is this. Since the episode on Fourteen with which Gus and I were in-

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volved twenty-odd years ago—the time when a gang of Cyclopean enterpreneurs were led by a failed Corps probationer to deposits of radioactive ore there, and used the local people as slave labor to exploit them—we've kept so keen a watch on the known ZRP's that the chance of outsiders from space being able to pull another such trick is negligible.

"On a hitherto undiscovered ZRP, though, all the facts would fit neatly. The gene-type of that graft would correspond well with an isolated group of refugees, from Irani basal strains, and one of the reasons why the Corps maintains its base here is that Cyclops is conveniently located for the entire volume of space through which the ZRP's are scattered."

Nole's face was haggard and pale. She broke off and gave him a look inviting comment.

"In other words," he said, "you think someone from Cyclops is using an unknown ZRP as a—a-spare-parts bank."

"Exactly," Maddalena agreed.

"But that's murder!"

"Of course it is, if they're killing the original owners of the organs they're taking. But don't think murder is so shocking to all human beings as it is to you! Where I've just come from, assassination is a recognized political weapon—and here on Cyclops, Gus tells me, one child in eight doesn't survive its first year. When life is short like that, it becomes cheap."

That was too much for Nole. A Corps medical officer was of necessity dedicated to the preservation of life no matter what the cost to himself. The theory Maddalena had put to him was too cold-blooded for him to endure. He excused himself with a whisper and headed for the nearest convenience to overcome the nausea which had revolted him.

"Where's Nole off to?" Langenschmidt demanded, turning away from his communicator.

"By the look of him, he needs to vomit," Maddalena shrugged. "I've been explaining to him that Kolb's leg was probably cut off some poor devil on a lost ZRP, and he's upset."

"Not surprised," Langenschmidt grunted. "Though he's by no means a practical man—witness what he allowed to happen tonight!—he's a nice guy at heart, and a damned good doctor. But for pity's sake, Maddalena, don't go spreading this notion of yours broadcast, will you? There are all kinds of possibilities we have to eliminate before we can act on the suggestion."

"Such as?" Maddalena said sourly.

"Well, the most likely is this one you put forward yourself—

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that the leg is synthetic. This would be much easier to do than a normal regeneration job, you realize, and probably within the capacity of medical computers such as you might find here. I'm having a search of the data initiated to determine whether Nole's right in saying the practice is unknown. If it is, I'll be surprised."

"Why? The number of worlds which can't afford full regeneration techniques is strictly limited, and of those, damned few would support a short-term stopgap arrangement—they'd rather go for the advanced method as soon as possible."

"I guess so," Langenschmidt sighed. "Nonetheless, I'm making the check. I'm also requesting the latest information on all the known ZRP's—I've asked for fullest details on the gene-type records which the Corps has made."

"But you think I'm right," Maddalena pressed him.

He was silent for long seconds. At last he gave a reluctant nod.

"I hope you're wrong, blast it! To have another scandal on Cyclops will give me headaches for the rest of my tour as commandant, and if we find out that this is a collective-guilt case, so we have to administer punitive measures, we shall be living here like an occupying army."

"Is that likely?"

"Yes and no. The mass of the people, insofar as they understand the ZRP problem, sympathize with a plight which so nearly resembles their own. Otherwise Quist wouldn't have popular support for her campaign against the policy of noninterference—and she certainly does. So a dirty business like this could scarcely be public knowledge—and indeed if it were we'd have stumbled on it before.

BUT Kolb's isn't likely to be an isolated case. And we still have here a top twentieth of the population who've reached positions of wealth and power by ruthlessness—I said this to you earlier, didn't I? And if you find being callous pays, then you're quite likely to feel that some primitive survivor on a ZRP is—is a null quantity. Who the hell cares what becomes of him so long as I'm made whole?"

"The pattern would be similar to that in the Carrig affair, then?" Maddalena hazarded. "A small group would be in full possession of the facts, but because what they have to offer is so valuable, those who benefit from it wouldn't investigate what they're getting—in turn a blind eye, as they say."

"What?"

"Turn a blind eye. It's a phrase that's survived on Thirteen, where there are a good many eye

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afflictions. I believe it's pre-galactic in origin."

"Prehistoric, I'd have said," Langenschmidt muttered. "Except on the ZRP's, I've never seen a blind person. When eyesight is so valuable, it's worth taking the trouble to preserve."

"Hmmm . . ." Maddalena cocked her head. "You said Kolb's isn't apt to be a unique case, didn't you? Would it be possible to find out whether any of the 'top twentieth' of the people of Cyclops have made unexpected recoveries from serious injuries or illnesses lately? Failure of their eyesight strikes me as a good starting-point."

"I must be tired," Langenschmidt said. "Or else life on this damned planet has sapped my intelligence. I should have thought of that myself. I'll get the matter looked into in the morning—I don't think there's much I can do tonight. It's past midnight, you realize?"

"I've been keeping Corps time for the past few weeks on an airless base-planet," Maddalena said tartly. "I've got out of gear with natural day and night." But the reference to the lateness of the hour made her stretch absentmindedly and repress a yawn.

"What action do you propose taking if my guess turns out to be well-founded? Will you hold Kolb here instead of letting them take him off to this local doctor —Rimerley, I think the name was?"

"Of course not!" Langenschmidt snapped.

"But he's the only evidence we have—"

"He's a two-edged sword," Langenschmidt interrupted. "To use one of the archaic phrases you seem to like! If I do hold him instead of sending him off to Rimerley, it'll be like sounding an alarm bell. You can bet that Rimerley is involved, to start with. He'll signal the team collecting material on the ZRP, they'll pull out instantly, and even if we do locate the planet we'll never find proof of any connection with Cyclops apart from a tenuous link via the gene-type of the tissue. And short of finding the rest of the original owner, or his surviving identical twin, we'll never bring the matter to trial."

"You're quite right, of course," Maddalena confirmed. "Will you wait until they actually bring the new graft down for him?"

"If we can spot that being done. Which I doubt. I expect we'll have to locate the ZRP and catch the collectors red-handed. And I don't have to tell you what a job that'll be!"

"I don't even see how—" Maddalena checked. "Oh yes, I guess it could be done, at that. It must be possible to find out the high-Irani areas of Zarathustra, and

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compute the most likely courses which ships leaving that part of the planet would have followed. But it'll be the devil's own problem, even then, and the search might take months."

"Years," said Langenschmidt succinctly. "Damn it, we're looking for ZRP's all the time, and if we haven't found this one by now, it must be in a highly improbable corner of space."

"How could the Cyclopeans have found it, do you think?"

"Shall we ask them when we catch them?" Langenschmidt snapped, and was immediately repentant. "Sorry! I didn't mean to bark at you like that."

"No, I'm the one who should apologize. After all, it's still only a suspicion, and I've no business pestering you as if it was already proven. And you are tired. I'll leave you in peace. Will you have me called in the morning in time to see Kolb collected? I'd be—interested."

"Surething," Langenschmidt agreed, and gave her a weary smile which she returned with warmth.

As she was walking away, he called after her.

"Maddalena!"

"Yes?"

"Too soon to ask your views on non-interference again, huh?"

"*Now* who's treating my suspicions as a proven fact?"

"Right you are." Langenschmidt smiled again, with greater naturalness this time. "Good night. And—it's good to see you after all this time."

"In spite of all the trouble I've brought with me? I'm flattered."

XIII

"GET away from that girl!" rasped Lors Heimdall.

The two members of his team who had been bending over the unconscious form of Soraya jerked and spun around. They had drawn back the light coverlet to expose her high, youthful bosom and flat firm belly, and the next stage in their plan took very little deduction to work out.

"What's wrong with you?" the older of them grunted. "Are we getting a high price for virgins this trip, or something? It's not going to make any odds in the long run!"

"Get the hell out of here!" Heimdall thundered, and tugged aside his black robe to reveal the butt of his energy gun.

The two men exchanged glances, shrugged, and complied.

Heimdall re-belted his robe and wiped a trace of sweat from his face. He dared not tell his subordinates just how necessary it was to get the girl home in perfect condition; one hint of the danger they had all been running since Kolb was taken to the Corps hospital, and they would desert.

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Still, luck was on his side so far. To have got his hands on the girl, the very same day he received the request from Rimerley, was remarkable, and had greatly built up his confidence. Of course, she was rather dark-complexioned, like nine out of ten of the inhabitants, but there were ways of eliminating the melanin secretion which caused that. And in every other respect she was close to perfect: the right build, the right proportions, the right category as regards immunological reactions . . . Rimerley had said, in view of the importance attached to this job, that he was prepared to accept far less adequate material and work it over to the required specifications; so much trouble would not after all be necessary.

He bent to spread the coverlet over Soraya again, and paused with his hands grasping the cloth. Of course, it was quite true that in the long run it wouldn't matter—no actual physical damage would result, apart from the inevitable minimum, and on any world with reasonable sexual standards that would have been sustained within a year or two of puberty, while as to psychological damage, that was absolutely irrelevant.

He blocked off the train of thought with determination, however, and threw the coverlet back to its former position. Then he crossed the room and seated himself before the carved wooden chest which concealed the subspace communicator.

RIMERLEY had been waiting tensely for the call ever since Kolb was brought in and he finished making his checks of the man's condition. As he had expected, he was in amazingly good shape considering what he had been through less than one full day earlier—the Corps hospital offered treatment for which Rimerley simply had no facilities.

But the facilities he could offer had brought him immense wealth and not inconsiderable hidden power. Now was the time to use that power, to protect himself.

The moment the call came, he knew from the expression of near-gloating on Heimdall's face that the worst of the risks had passed: that resulting from delay in making the key proposition to Quist.

"You got someone?" he rapped, leaning forward excitedly.

"I think so," Heimdall nodded. "I haven't yet found the material for Kolb, but—"

"The hell with that," Rimerley interrupted. "We can see to Kolb at our leisure. First we have to make sure the leisure happens!" He peered at the corner of the screen, where a draped body was dimly visible, slightly out of fo-

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cus, beyond Heimdall's shoulder. "Is that the girl behind you?"

"That's the one. We had to bring her in by giving her a phoney attack of the local killing disease—the quakes, as they call it—but she's over the symptoms now and in artificial coma. In view of the circumstances, we weren't able to find out much about her barring what her boyfriend told us, but it is definite that she's no older than her mid-teens, and all the items which you listed for me when you put in the request appear to be satisfactory. She even has the right blood-group, which I gather you were worried about."

"Has she? That's amazing!" Rimerley felt tension go out of him like air from a punctured spacesuit. "The commonest group on Cyclops seems to be the least common out there. I take it you're sending her home straight away?"

"I was wondering, in view of the urgency, whether we ought not to risk bringing the ship down directly to some point near here. The chance of it being seen—"

"Isn't worth taking," Rimerley cut in. "No, even if it means a day's delay, transport her by inconspicuous means to the usual landing-area in the hills. There remains a slight chance of being caught, you know, and compounding what we've done by exposing a ZRP to open contact with space-travel is a needless additional danger."

"I've always assumed they'll throw the book at us if they catch us," Heimdall grunted.

"I've had this out with you a dozen times," Rimerley countered. "There are enough worlds offering voluntary euthanasia for us to make a case—Just a moment! Have you told the girl anything?"

"Haven't spoken to her since we gave her the fake disease, of course!"

"Hm . . . We'll have to convince her, for the sake of appearances, that she's deathly ill and better off enjoying a quiet decease."

"We've done that successfully more times than I can count," Heimdall commented with a cynical smile.

"Yes, but—Hell, why I'm wasting time *I* don't know! I'm going to see Quist now. Wish me luck."

THE message was brought to Quist during the second session of the day's conference. Dr. Aleazar Rimerley was waiting to see her at her earliest convenience.

Damn the man! Picking this moment to come—and in person, for some inconceivable reason! A communicator would have served for any message, surely!

She bit her lip, looking around

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the conference hall while the servant who had brought the message waited discreetly at the back of her tall chair. The morning had seen the last of the differences of opinion between delegates ironed out to acceptable levels; this afternoon, there had been several much-applauded suggestions for lines of action to secure a reversal of the non-interference policy. Two of them even, in Quist's view, offered a better-than-fifty-fifty chance of succeeding: a record.

Omar Haust hadn't shown up after his disgraceful exhibition of last evening. Maybe that had something to do with it—delegates from wealthy advanced worlds always seemed to be uncomfortable in the presence of a genuine ZRP native.

The speaker who had the floor at the moment sensed that something was amiss. He paused courteously and looked at Quist. So did everyone else.

Cursing again silently, but keeping her face composed, she stood up.

"I'll beg your indulgence. A very dear friend—as some of you have heard—was savaged by a wolfshark yesterday."

A murmur of sympathy spread around the meeting; she saw one or two baffled expressions, but seat-neighbors of those who did not know about wolfsharks soon explained.

"I'm told that the doctor attending him wishes to see me urgently. If you can manage to forgive me—?"

"Of course!" exclaimed a dozen voices, and she slipped away with a bow.

* * *

Rimerley was waiting for her in an audience room with delicate silver-filigree walls. The setting seemed particularly appropriate to the most highly reputed medical man on the planet, Quist thought, and her irritation at being summoned away from the conference gave way to anxiety at Kolb's condition. If Rimerley had come here in person, that might all too easily mean bad news.

She said, "Doctor, is it something about—?"

He cut her short brusquely. "Before we discuss anything, I want your assurance that we are neither overheard nor recorded."

"Doctor! I assure you—"

"Save it. I know that no one gets to the heights you've scaled on a planet like ours without being very cautious and far-sighted. But caution says we talk privately about the matter I've come to raise with you."

She stared at him. Previously, Rimerley had treated her with urbane courtesy—even obsequiousness. Now he was addressing her not merely as an equal, but even as an inferior. That last statement was an order: gift-

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wrapped, but an order nonetheless.

Coloring, she snapped, "I prefer not to be spoken to in those terms!"

"I know. But if you care about Justin Kolb, you'll have to put up with it."

There was a pause. Finally she shrugged and crossed the room to the far side. Lifting one of the elaborate filigree decorative motifs, she exposed a small switch and twisted it through ninety degrees.

"All right. The record will show nothing now—not even the fact that I came in to join you. What is it you want to say? Have you—have you attended to Justin yet?"

"No. Oh, there's nothing to worry about as far as he's concerned—the Corps doctors did a good first-aid job on the stump and it'll heal quickly."

The reference to a stump made her flinch. To cover this out-of-character weakness, she countered him harshly.

"How soon will he be well? And why, if that's all that's been done to him so far, have you left him directly after taking him into your care?"

"There's nothing I can do until we find a graft for him," Rimerly said. And waited for his meaning to sink in.

"A—graft?" Quist listened to her own repetition of the word, as if it were mere noise. "But I thought you used regeneration—isn't that what it's called?"

"For a woman who's been the effective government of a planet for so long, you're astonishingly ignorant," Rimerly said. "I'll cheerfully regenerate the limb for you—if you'll buy me a mega-brain-capacity medical computer to do it, and pay for having it stocked with the appropriate data for Cyclops. Since you can't afford to do that, Kolb will have to get the same as he did before: a limb-graft, which is easier and cheaper."

"Before? You mean—"

"I'm coming to what I mean. And it's going to take a lot of explaining, so I'd better sit down." Rimerley glanced around for a chair and did as he said.

"Graft!" he continued. "The taking of an existing organ and the incorporation of it into another body. Clear? You gave me Justin Kolb with a leg lost to space-gangrene, and I replaced it with a nearly perfect match, immunologically neutral, the nerves and muscles tied in as well as might be hoped. Not well enough for him to endure the strain of space-side work any longer, but this wasn't a drawback you'd object to in view of your—uh—relationship."

"Rimerley," Quist said between clenched teeth, "I don't know what you're getting at—"

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"Then wait till you find out!" Rimerley ordered. "Yesterday that leg was being attended to by Corps doctors. I have no way of knowing whether they looked at it closely enough to determine its origin, but if they did, you're in trouble. Apparently you didn't actually know that limb-regeneration was beyond our facilities; it's common knowledge, however, and it would be assumed that you connived at what was done—"

QUIST was waving a feeble hand, floundering two sentences behind Rimerley's urgent flow of words. "Origin?" she forced out.

"Yes, *origin*. Did you think I bought the leg off some dockside layabout in Gratignol, maybe? Even a starving fisherman wouldn't be likely to sell a healthy limb, would he? No, it was imported. From somewhere where none of the natives can spread the news—to be precise, from an unnumbered ZRP."

Quist's mouth worked, but no sound emerged.

"I was going to say," Rimerley pursued, "no intelligent outsider would credit that you, Alura Quist, imagined I'd regenerated the leg! You must have known. And what happens to your precious conference, to start with, when the word gets out?"

The prospect of this news reaching the delegates was appalling. Quist clenched her hands into bony fists.

"This is blackmail!" she whispered. "You won't get away with it! I'll denounce you—I don't care what happens to Justin. Maybe the Corps will mend his leg when I tell them about—"

"Denounce me? It'll look like panic to save your campaign against the Corps, and they won't fall for it! Besides, the Corps will have other things on their minds. After what you do to them!"

She gave him a blank stare.

"The Corps might—yes, just possibly *might* heal Justin Kolb as a generous gesture," Rimerley conceded with a judicious air. "But they won't offer you a new lease of life, as I will. You're afraid of old age, aren't you? You're afraid of death, and the long dark silence beyond."

There was something so evocative of terror in the words that Quist found herself nodding numbly.

"So now we come to the point," Rimerley said. "The proposal I have for you, which is to the advantage of both of us. I don't want this story to get out, even though you'll be the worst sufferer. I'm saving my own skin, and I won't deny the fact. But the chance of the Corps being sufficiently intrigued by Kolb's leg to make investigations depends on what else they have to occupy them, and you're in a position to

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give them a problem which will drive everything else into the background—for good, let's hope. What's more, I see from the news reports on your current conference that you've already prepared the ground for what I want you to do."

He added, off hand, "Kolb will get his leg back too, of course."

Quist was absolutely frozen for long moments. Finally, in a voice drained of emotion, she said, "What, then?"

"What I offer?" Rimerley countered. "Oh, nothing much. Twenty years of additional youth. Maybe thirty."

Greed blazed in Quist's eyes for a moment, until it was extinguished by tears. "It's a cruel joke!" she said hoarsely. "It's the foulest dirtiest—"

"I'm *not* joking." Rimerley leaned back in his chair with such complete calm she was again tempted to believe him.

"How?"

"That I'm not telling you. Yet. I'm simply making the offer. Twenty years, possibly thirty." He studied her with insolent directness. "How's the unsupported shape of your breasts these days? Flabby, I imagine! And the belly-muscles must be giving way by now, in spite of cosmetic treatment. I could fix all that."

Once more, silence filled the room. It dragged on. Rimerley broke it, shrugging and rising.

"Too bad. I didn't really expect you to prefer public humiliation and probably trial for an infringement of the laws against interference with ZRP's. Which will be a very ironical climax to your campaign, won't it?"

"Wait," she whispered. "Damn you! You knew there was one bribe I couldn't resist!"

"Of course I did," Rimerley said with a sneer.

"What—what do I have to do?"

He told her, in a single crackling sentence, and added, "Today!"

XIV

AS promised, they had fetched Justin Kolb away early in the morning. Maddalena saw him go, in a white-painted hospital 'copter which went droning towards the southwest. Its design struck her as somehow archaic, but after twenty years in surroundings absolutely devoid of technology beyond crude toolmaking, she found she was ill-attuned to refinements in engineering practice.

"I wish there was some way we could have put a tracer on him," Langenschmidt had muttered as he stood beside her, gazing at the diminishing white speck against the vivid blue sky.

"I'd have thought there was!"

"I asked Nole what a reasonably thorough medical check

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might overlook, and he said, point-blank, 'Nothing'. Rimerley can't be incompetent—his patients have included some of the most notable people on Cyclops."

"Did you ask Nole how it was in that case he came to overlook the nature of Kolb's mended leg?"

"As a matter of fact"—Langenschmidt looked slightly uncomfortable—"I did. We had some words about it. But the point stands: no tracer, for fear of altering them."

"Surely you know where he's going, though."

"Allegedly, to Rimerley's private island. But I'd be happier if I was convinced of that. As you said last night, he's our evidence."

"You've kept some tissue-samples, presumably."

"Nole took some from places where they wouldn't be noticed, and they're preserved as a calibration standard for this analysis of gene-types he's doing. At least, that's our story if the matter comes up." The 'copter had vanished. Briskening: "Well, I can't stand here all day. I have a base to run."

"I haven't," Maddalena said demurely. "And since you had me brought to Cyclops, I guess there's something you can have me do instead of 'standing here all day'."

"Actually there are a couple of things . . . I wasn't very eager to ask you, since it seems unfair when you're theoretically on long furlough, but as the subject has come up—"

"You're a poor diplomat, Gus, in spite of your boasting. Well, what is it?

"What spare time I have right now is generally taken up with studying the progress of this damned conference of Quist's on non-interference. The local news bulletins are full of it, painting it as an unselfish venture by Cyclops on behalf of their poor brothers neglected by the rich greedy worlds of—etcetera; why should I tell you what you can imagine easily enough? There was some kind of outburst at an official banquet last night—the delegate from ZRP. One got drunk and uttered a few home truths which embarrassed the organizers dreadfully. Catch the reports of the morning session of the conference, will you? Let me have a digest of their progress if any at the noon break. That's one thing. And the other is of your own making: Go help my overworked programming staff to get a line on the probable location of Twenty-two. We probably won't get the margin of error lower than a hundred parsecs, but if we can possibly shave it to fifty I think I can swing over the assignment of a couple of search ships."

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THE problem was fascinating, and intensely complicated. It was known what the population distribution had been on Zarathustra at the time of the nova, so it was possible to determine which of the high-Irani areas would have been on the day side and hence wiped out immediately. On the night side, however, there were three notable zones where the minority language was spoken, and in any of these such a gene-type as they had found in Kolb's leg might have occurred.

With this as a basis, it was then necessary to compute whether one or two or all three stood a chance of getting people from their homes to the nearest spaceport before the planet turned far enough on its axis to expose the rising ships to the nova. Only those which had been able to keep in shadow of the planet for several million miles had escaped the storm of radiation.

One of the key zones had been in darkness for a full seven hours; the other two, for a mere half of that.

Settling on that as the most likely course of events, the team instructing the computers then had to work out what trajectory ships would have followed to remain in shadow if they had stayed till the last moment picking up refugees; if they had left with an hour to spare, or two hours, and so on, backward through the Zarathustran night. And from these hypothetical lines of flight, they attempted to calculate where they would have wound up.

The process went smoothly for a while; several possible courses were at once ruled out because the Corps had explored the volume of space through which they led, to the extreme range any ship could have covered with its passengers in a fit state to endure a landing. After that, though, it was like plodding through heavy fog and deep mud.

Maddalena complied with Langenschmidt's request to hear the local news bulletins about the conference; they were platitudinous, merely giving extracts from pious speeches interlarded with praise for Quist's and Cyclops' noble compassion towards the ZRP's. Listening, she was reminded of what Langenschmidt had said last night, when he asked if it was too soon to requestion her on her attitude towards the non-interference policy.

She was no longer sure what her attitude was. And to find this reaction in herself so soon after her arrival here was disturbing.

She was glad to lose herself again in the complexities of interstellar course-plotting, and was deep in what appeared to be a promising assumption when an urgent message came through to

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the computing room for her: would she go see the commandant at once?

Reluctantly she complied, framing a jocular complaint to utter when she saw Langenschmidt. It died on her lips. One glance told her he had been badly shocked by something.

"Gus!" she exclaimed. "You look as though you've just heard this sun is going nova too!"

"Next best thing," grated Langenschmidt. "At any rate, it's having the same effect—we're compelled to evacuate."

"What?"

"Sit down and I'll play you back a recording of the news. I couldn't trust myself to repeat it coherently." He slammed switches on the desk at which he sat, and a screen lit. Maddalena moved numbly to a seat from which she could see it properly.

AT first there was only a blur, with an automatic voice-over signal identifying the time of reception and dating it on the basic Corps scale; then the blurring faded, and a harsh incisive voice with a Cyclops accent rang out.

"Personal and official from Alura Quist to the Commandant, Corps Galactica Repair, Refit and Recreation Base, Cyclops. Alura Quist!"

A face appeared on the screen. Maddalena studied it with interest; this was the first time she had seen the famous Quist, who had for so many years been undisputed arbiter of this planet's fate. She saw a pretty blonde woman whose best attempts to stand off the effects of age had not entirely succeeded.

"Commandant, you will learn from the appended recording of my address to the Conference on Non-interference with Zarathustra Refugee Planets at which I am currently presiding what it is that you are required to do. I only wish to add that action is to be taken forthwith to implement the decision of the government of my planet."

The face vanished, and re-appeared, this time in the context of a large conference hall, in which sat delegates from worlds affecting over a dozen different styles of dress. Quist was addressing them, and had clearly won the approval of all those listening.

"You will recall," she was saying, "that the respected representative from ZRP One—who is regrettably indisposed and cannot hear me make this public pronouncement—suggested a lever to oust the Corps from its role of policy-maker in this area. I have reflected on what was suggested, and come to an inescapable conclusion: it is not consistent with our professed ideals to tolerate the Corps' presence here while they are flouting our wishes."

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Stunned silence, from the audience in the screen and from Maddalena.

"I therefore wish to inform you that I am serving notice today on the base's commandant to withdraw all Corps personnel from Cyclops and close the base. This cannot presumably be done overnight, but it must be done quickly, and in any case from this moment forward the base will be quarantined, and all contact whatever between Cyclops and the Corps Galactica will cease barring such official conversations as the evacuation may call for. I—"

Stormy applause drowned out the remainder of the statement. Langenschmidt snapped the switch to stop the replay.

"Well?" he rapped.

Maddalena shook her head, dazed. "I thought you said the planet couldn't afford to lose the base!"

"It can't. Which means the Quist woman has gone insane. Insane or not, though, she's legally the boss of Cyclops, and when I get word from Corps HQ —which I've sent for—I'm damned sure they'll tell me I've got to do as she orders."

XV

LANGENSCHMIDT'S gloomy assessment of the situation was justified; his own computers assured him of that even before a verdict came through from headquarters. No civilized world was compelled to provide facilities for the Corps. To obtain those which it needed and could not adequately arrange on the airless lumps of rock where most of its bases were sited, the Corps wrote treaties like an independent sovereign planet. But it wasn't one, and in the event of a planetary government deciding that it wished to withdraw leased territory, the decision was unilateral and unarguable.

When the legal experts from HQ informed him of this situation, Langenschmidt railed at them, demanding why such a predicament had not been foreseen and guarded against. There was a chilly tone in the voice of the man he was talking to as he retorted that the circumstances were unique and unprecedented, and after all he—the base commandant on the spot—had been in the ideal position to do the foreseeing.

Sweating, Langenschmidt cut the connection.

But that crack was still ringing in his memory the next morning when he went out on the main pontoon of the repair docks to meet the official Cyclopean representative he had been warned to expect. This was a very tall, very thin, very bitter young man

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in immaculate white uniform, who stepped down the gangway from the big skimmer which had brought him and even before Langenschmidt had a chance to speak waved a brisk hand at the men who had gathered on the vessel's deck as she approached the pontoon.

"My staff," he said. "Empowered by the government of Cyclops to supervise the evacuation of Corps personnel."

Langenschmidt looked them over. In all, they numbered at least two hundred. Like a good many worlds whose economy was too precarious to support full employment and too poor to pass the leisure barrier beyond which working became irrelevant for the individual, Cyclops made the worst of both worlds by maintaining a government labor force analogous to the pre-galactic armed forces of Earthside nation-states. These would be a detachment of picked men drawn from that pool.

They were armed, Langenschmidt saw sickly, with obsolete but doubtless workable energy guns. Quist *must* have lost her mind!

"And material?" he snapped.

The tall thin young man blinked at him. "My instructions are not definite on that point," he shrugged. "I am simply to see that this base is evacuated of all its personnel within a reasonable time. Unofficially, I'm to inform you that the government regards seven days as reasonable."

"*Seven days!*" Langenschmidt hadn't meant to let the exclamation go, but he could not restrain his dismay as he surveyed the immense repair docks and all the buildings beyond—a complete self-contained city, with some of its foundations including those under the space-drive test-beds going clear to the bedrock of the planet.

"Seven days," the tall thin young man said, and gave a cadaverous smile. "My name is Bengt Barly, incidentally. I hold the rank of major in the Cyclops space-force."

"Hold tight," Langenschmidt told him savagely. "You're apt to drop it any moment."

He swung on his heel and signalled one of his subordinates.

"This is *Major* Barly," he snapped. "No doubt he would prefer to deal with someone of his own status. Certainly I'd rather he did so."

BARLY colored bright pink, which gave Langenschmidt a moment of gloomy satisfaction. But that was the last such moment he enjoyed for some time.

What possibilities were open to him, other than complying with the edict of the government? His superiors said there were none; ships would be de-

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tached from other posts and sent to conduct the evacuation in the speediest and most efficient manner available resources would allow. And that was that.

He drove fist into palm in helpless fury. Clearly, the only escape was to overset the Quist government—and how could he do that? If only they had delayed this lunatic expulsion order another couple of days, long enough to pile up concrete evidence on the matter of Kolb's leg—which reminded him that Maddalena hadn't shown up this morning. He looked around vaguely for her, but she wasn't to be seen, and immediately his other worries drove her out of his thoughts.

Overset the Quist government . . . This was the obvious lever. But already, during the night, radar-carrying ships had encircled the base island, and a ship had gone into stationary orbit at twenty-three thousand miles, watching through sensitive detectors for any breach of the rule that there was to be no contact whatever between the Corps and the rest of Cyclops. Even a submersible wouldn't get away to hunt the evidence Maddalena had suggested and check on rich Cyclopeans who had made miraculous recoveries lately. After all, even the Bracy kid's trawler had an electronic fish-finder, and submarine detectors would certainly be watching the nearby waters—

The trawler!

He stopped himself, by a tremendous effort, from turning to look at the ramshackle craft, with its peeling paint and torn solar sails which were in fact currently being replaced by a robot which no one had remembered to give contrary orders to.

Hmmm . . . ! But the idea was only a germ so far, and there still remained his other obligations: more inescapable ones. He shelved the problem of what could be done with a sure method of escape from the island, and went to attend to another pressing matter. It derived from one of his unsuccessful pleas to headquarters; begging for orders to decline Quist's ultimatum, he had suggested that this was a plot to get the Cyclopeans' hands on the material resources at the base, and perhaps set up a commercial starship repair service with what they inherited.

The staff of Corps HQ were sufficiently cynical for that to register. But they didn't change their instructions. They merely recommended the installation of a new switch, radio-controlled, on the main fission generator buried at the island's heart, so that as soon as the personnel had been evacuated what was left could be reduced to a smoking crater.

That would be a small consola-

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tion. Sighing, Langenschmidt set off to rout out his chief power engineer.

MADDALENA had thought of the trawler much sooner—last night, while restlessly trying to dose off. She had also taken into consideration the fact that, not being on the established strength of the Corps here, she figured in the computer records only as "personnel on leave" and a tap on a computer keyboard could abolish her without explaining where she had gone.

These points led her to pester Nole for half an hour, until in sheer desperation he allowed her what she wanted: to see Bracy Dyge, in private.

When she opened the door of his room, the fisherboy cowered back like a frightened animal, doubtless having taken the shaving of his head—part of the treatment necessitated by his exposure to an overdose of radiation—as a prelude to some terrible punishment for his temreity last night.

It took all Maddalena's experience as a diplomat among primitive peoples to bring him to the point where he would listen to her without trembling. Then she seized her hard-won advantage.

"Bracy," she coaxed, "didn't you say when you first came here that you had always dreamed of working for the Corps?"

The boy's answer was inaudible; she had to wheedle for minutes to get him to speak his mind honestly. Then what he had to say was hardly promising. She damned Nole for the sarcastic reception he must have given the boy's reluctant plea; it had closed him up tighter than a Pelagian clam.

She was forced to make wild promises and offer wilder bribes—not to him: for his family, which was more honorable—before she got the assurance of his help. Langenschmidt wouldn't like this, but then he might well not like any of it.

The door of the room slid aside, and there he was.

"Beat me to it again, did you?" he muttered.

Maddalena was bewildered for a moment, and then she started to laugh. "You mean you thought of it too?"

"Of course I did!" Langenschmidt rapped. "Did you expect me to lie down under the edict of this damned idiot woman, Quist? Nole told me you were down here, and I immediately saw why I'd had that boat of his on my mind all day, in spite of the swarm of Cyclopean officials crawling over the base like bedbugs."

"Well, it's no good to you, is it?" Maddalena countered. "Your chance of staying behind on Cyclops is zero."

"I could swing it so that—"

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"Could you, *hell!* The protocol of the evacuation of a Corps base traces all the way back to the abandonment of a sea-going ship on Earth. I'm closer to my Corps training than you are, by a long way. You've probably forgotten the irrelevancies you pick up in training—like that one—but there's the regulation if you care to check: the commandant is the last to leave the base, and the man or woman responsible for handing over control to the successor authority."

Langenschmidt gave a groan. "They planned this to drive me out of my mind with frustration! But what good is the boat to you?"

"If you'll let me finish what I was saying to young Bracy here, you'll see soon enough." And, turning to the fisherboy, who had listened with blank incomprehension to this exchange, she resumed, "Now if you had good maps, and perhaps a radio, you wouldn't mind sailing half around the planet, would you?"

"I'd sail to the stars if I had a ship," Bracy declared with a sudden fit of braggadocio.

"I believe you. You're a brave boy—*man*. Anyone could tell that after hearing how you killed the giant wolfshark. Now here's your chance to prove it still further, and to do the kind of job which will interest the Corps in you, as well as earning you that new set of solar sails, and a new set of reactors, and a radio for your ship—" Maddalena eyed Langenschmidt as she spoke, and got a shrug to indicate that if the Corps was leaving behind much of its material here at the base it could afford to give Bracy a few such odds and ends.

THE coaxing went on, the flattery, the wheedling. Langenschmidt's mind, greatly preoccupied, went darting away. If only they had waited till this business of Maddalena's "undiscovered ZRP" had been cleared up . . . . Was it coincidence or not? Oh, surely it must be! True, Rimerly was in the spare parts trade up to his neck—must be, as the surgeon who performed the graft on Kolb—but surely he couldn't have a hold over Quist sufficient to compel her to act this way! The existence of a link between them wasn't proof of criminal complicity. Even if he was blackmailing her because she knew the source of Kolb's new leg, that alone wouldn't make her jeopardize the planetary budget of Cyclops for the indefinite future. As soon as the drawbacks of losing the Corps' rent began to be felt, she would be done for anyway. Someone else would overthrow her government and more than likely invite the Corps back. In which case, perhaps he shouldn't blow up the base—re-

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possessing a workable installation was one thing, rebuilding a pile of rubble was another, and progress over the past century had probably made the job uneconomic.

Running the base here wasn't as challenging as maintaining his old Patrol beat, but it had its own rewards, and he had enjoyed the work.

If I do leave here for good, he told himself sourly, *I can go two ways—back to headquarters to serve as the walking spokesman for a computer, or out of the Corps. Or else I can jump in space.*

He grew suddenly aware that Maddalena was addressing him, and muttered an apology for his rudeness.

"I was asking," she repeated with a twinkle, "whether you've booby-trapped the island."

"How did you—? Oh, I guess it's an obvious precaution. Yes, I have, but with a radio-activated trigger."

"Don't be in too much of a hurry to press the button, then. Bracy here has just agreed to smuggle me out of the area and around the world to Rimerley's private island, and with his help I may very well give you back your job when the Quist government falls in the wake of the row I'm cooking up."

"You?" Langenschmidt said.

"Yes, me!" She gave him a defiant stare. "Gus, the reason I've been hanging around making up my mind what to do with my furlough is perfectly simple. I don't want to 'rest up' on Earth or any other soft-centered planet. That's all I've been doing for twenty mortal years. I want some action to get my blood flowing again—and here it comes!"

XVI

WHAT'S that—object over there?" the insufferable Major Barly inquired, gesturing.

Langenschmidt turned, hoping that his personal concern with the "object" would not show. The sun lay bright and full over the gleaming hulls of the vessels from space currently in the repair dock, making the contrast between them and the tiny, dirty trawler all the more marked. Around the fishing-boat, robots and men were busy in a manner that could not be glossed over except by a half truth.

"That?" he said with maximum smoothness. "Oh, you'll recall that Justin Kolb—Quist's friend—was rescued from an encounter with a wolfshark. That trawler belongs to the boy who rescued him. We don't want to exacerbate relations with the populace more than we can help, so we thought we'd overhaul it for him while he's recovering from his experience."

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Major Barly's opinion was clear from his expression: only idiots would concern themselves with one worthless fisherboy at a juncture like this. However, he vouchsafed his gracious permission to carry on, so long as it did not interfere with the speedy departure of all corps personnel.

It was lucky, Langenschmidt reflected, that Quist had sent them a fool to supervise the evacuation. Maybe there were only fools in the Cyclopean government forces, but that was doubtful. An intelligent man, Langenschmidt suspected, would have wondered what was amiss when the base commandant—so gruff and ill-mannered on first meeting—suddenly turned extremely affable and insisted on spending the entire working day escorting his visitors over the base, snapping at subordinates who seemed reluctant to comply with the Cyclopeans' requests, apologizing for any delay longer than two minutes, and in general being co-operative to the point of parody.

Registers of personnel were printed out of the computers; roll-calls were taken to ensure that no one slipped away unaccounted for; ships were called in from nearby stations to orbit Cyclops until the moment—scheduled for day six after the ultimatum—when loading of personnel and goods would begin.

Damned if I don't think I made a mistake in running such an efficient base, Langenschmidt told himself glumly. *If I hadn't given strict orders to the contrary, I'm pretty sure we could have done the whole job in two days flat.*

MEANTIME, while he cast around for new ways of stalling the Cyclopeans, two significant tasks were in progress. A friendly executive of the Corps personnel branch, back at headquarters, was tracing one Pavel Brzeska, on promotion furlough following his tour as commandant of the Patrol sector which included Langenschmidt's old beat—normally, Langenschmidt preferred not to have more truck with generals than he could avoid, but this was a special case—and some highly interesting work was going on at the dock, under the rough wooden deck of Bracy's trawler.

Already it had had enough trickery and gadgets crammed into its small hull to make it the envy of the richest fishing family in Gratignol. If there was room for all the machinery Maddalena had specified as "potentially handy", it would wind up being the envy of the richest private yachtsman this side of Earth.

Not that the said yachtsman would ever get to hear of it.

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BY the evening of Day Two, as Langenschmidt was now mentally labelling it, both these matters arrived at a satisfactory conclusion. The trawler would have to make its departure as openly as possible, so there was no question of a night sailing—a waste of several hours, but on the other hand no matter how fast the ship could potentially travel it would have to dawdle until it was beyond the watchful ring of Cyclopean forces, which would make the start of the trip very slow anyway. Maddalena was closeted with Bracy, training him in some of the techniques the rebuilt vessel would call on him to employ.

And the call came through from Pavel Brzeska. Langenschmidt, having made quite certain that the Cyclopean inspectors would be kept away for an hour or two, took it in his villa.

"Gus!" the new general exclaimed as the connection came through. "I just got the news of the pickle you're in out on Cyclops! What possessed you to get backed into a corner by that crowd? You've tangled with them before, haven't you? During the affair on Fourteen, I seem to remember."

"That's right, with Maddalena Santos who's here now; I sent for her because of the Conference on Non-Interference with ZRP's they're holding."

"Heard about it. The first time Cyclops has made the news in the Old System since its original breakaway from Dagon, I imagine. There's a powerful lobby working on the subject, and a good deal of sentimental propaganda being splashed around." Brzeska scowled. "What does it look like from the Cyclops end, anyway?

"Much the same as those we've had before—pious and empty. But listen, Pavel! What I need you for is something more or less related to the ZRP's, and with your background you can tell me a lot of things I daren't obtain conspicuously through normal channels. I'm going on a string of suspicions, and though I'm morally certain I'm right I can't call for full Corps support without more solid evidence."

"Explain!" Brzeska commanded.

Langenschmidt did so. He wound up, "It's been very tricky trying to complete the calculations involved, of course—we have to keep taking the Cyclopean inspectors in and out of the computing rooms to check on manifests and personnel registers and so forth. But by—uh—a bit of dodging we've managed to narrow the search area in which the missing ZRP must lie down to a fifty-parsec sphere. Who do I ask to loan me some ships to find it?"

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Brzeska scowled again, this time ferociously. "Damnation! What's become of the Corps in your sector since I came home? Time was, if a suspicion like yours blew up, they'd assign you the entire Fourth Fleet and no questions asked!"

"If they hadn't issued this ultimatum to me, I'd have been in a position to make the request officially. As it stands, the assumption is that I'm costing the Corps its base here through incompetence, poor intelligence and general mishandling of relations with the local government."

Brzeska eyed him keenly. "I know. There's a three-member commission of inquiry on its way to you—should reach you just about in time to see you leave, if this one week's grave stands. And—ah—*did* you foul things up that way?"

"I did not. I took it for granted that Cyclops wouldn't cut its collective throat. Without the income from the base their planetary budget will go to hell in two years."

"I know."

"I didn't realize you'd made a special study of the matter," Langenschmidt said with some bitterness.

"But I have," Brzeska countered softly. "It was touch and go whether another commandant was appointed after your immediate predecessor, or whether the base should be closed as obsolete and superfluous. The dependence of Cyclops on the revenue from it tipped the balance. Actually, when they consulted me I advised continuance—I went there on local leave and enjoyed some wolfshark-hunting when I was younger."

"It sounds as though I picked the right man to contact," Langenschmidt said, pleased.

"You certainly did. Now—let's see . . ." Brzeska stared at nothing for a moment. "Oh yes. You want Keita Bakary, at my old base. He'll fix what you want in short order."

"Thanks very much. What I do plan to do, incidentally, is slip away under the pretext of being called to a top-level confernece on the redeployment of personnel from here and the selection of a substitute base-location, and by the time they finish investigating the circumstances I should have the rope braided to hang Quist by the neck.

Brzeska shuddered visibly. "You pick some unpleasant similes, Gus. Must be the effect of your long-time contact with the ZRP's. Well, I wish you success, and a speedy return to your base."

IT was still quite dark, with another hour till dawn, when Maddalena stole down the steps to the dock at which Bracy's

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trawler was moored. A tightly co-ordinated plan to distract the attention of the Cyclopean inspectors, nodding at their guard-posts, ensured that she reached her goal safely and was able to slip below unnoticed.

There, she laid herself down in a concealed compartment just forward of the engines and ran a quick check of the new instrumentation which had been fitted. All seemed to be in perfect order. She repressed a chuckle due to sheer exhilaration and spoke in a whisper to the microphone she wore taped against her vocal cords.

"Gus! I got aboard—no trouble—and your engineers have done a magnificent job on the boat. I don't know where it's all been put, but one still has so much room I was afraid at first sight something had been left out!"

"If you really want to know," Langenschmidt answered in a tinny buzz from the bone-conduction receiver Nole had fitted to her, "they took out the original lining of the hull and replaced it with solid-state and printed circuitry. Be careful not to foul any rocks—a dent in the hull could put a dozen gadgets out of operation."

"If you wanted to hit a rock with this kind of nav equipment, you'd have to aim deliberately—and at that the automatics would probably overrule you." Maddalena made reflexively to brush back her hair, and remembered belatedly that last evening she had had it trimmed to the regulation Patrol length of one inch—as a safety precaution when wearing a space-helmet. She wasn't sure why, but a set of space-kit was among the gear she had asked to have put aboard.

"Just a second," from Langenschmidt, and then: "That was Nole. Bracy is now awake and they're checking him over. His condition last night appeared good, but you'll have to make sure he continues to take drugs against the dose of radiation he received. Also he doesn't like the flavor of our standard high-vitamin rations. I tried him on synthesizer cake and he likes that okay, so he'll be coming aboard with a portable diet-synthesizer—a 'farewell gift' from his friends in the Corps."

"Barly will probably take it off him," Maddalena said sourly.

"He won't get the chance. I obtained his permit to clear the trawler for open sea last night, and then Nole fixed him—uh—a liquid lullaby. He'll sleep till noon."

"A shame. I had all I could stand of synthesizer cake away back when on Fourteen. Well, all I have to do now, I guess, is wait."

"Exactly—until you're hull-

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down away from the last of the Cyclopean ships watching this area. And then—swift journey!"

Maddalena gave a throaty laugh and signed off.

Bracy Dyge played his part magnificently, Langenschmidt had to admit. He came down the steps to the dock with just the right mixture of regret at leaving the comfortable island and the luxuries the Corps enjoyed, and eagerness to try out the new solar sails and mended fish-finder which were the official extent of the modifications to his boat.

"There was no call to go to such trouble for the kid," said one of the Cyclopean inspectors, a man with a face like a lemon whom Langenschmidt had preferred not to fix a name on in case it was as ugly as he was. "I'm sure Alura Quist will take care to see he gets properly rewarded."

"I'm sure," Langenschmidt agreed blandly, forbearing to mention that if all went well Quist would be getting a reward of her own quite shortly.

He was almost holding his breath as the trawler eased out to open water, with Bracy proudly waving at his new solar sails. Then he realxed. In two hours, or three at the most, the boat would have passed the outermost circle of quarantine vessels, and then some remarkable changes would come over it.

The solar sails would be furled, and a pair of hydrofoils would extrude from a hidden compartment under the hull, and the compact fission reactor which had replaced the old stored-power accumulators would feed power to the pipes—and the trawler, shaking a little, but perfectly sound after what the engineers had done to it, would take off for Rimerley's private island at a comfortable hundred and fifty knots.

Quite neat. *Quite* neat. He only hoped he would have been able to wipe the grin from his face by the time he next had to confront Barly and explain about the need for his departure to attend this important conference about a base to substitute for the one being closed down.

XVII

THAT voyage was among the most extraordinary experiences of Maddalena's chequered life. She had hung from the talons of a parradile; she had dropped through atmosphere with nothing but a spacesuit's reaction jets to save her from a fatal crash; she had canoed over rapids and ridden all manner of odd beasts of burden. But streaking across the oceans of Cyclops was perhaps the weirdest journey of all.

To start with, the news that

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a Gratignol trawler—last seen limping along at a typical speed of a few knots—was outrunning all but the fastest passenger skimmers plying between the more densely inhabited islands would certainly have alerted someone's interest if it had been noised around. Accordingly, whenever the automatic detectors spotted another vessel in the vicinity, they cut the power and spread the solar sails. Bracy and Maddalena then sat out idly on the deck looking as though they hadn't a worry in the universe bar the shortage of oilfish in these waters. The danger past, the power returned, the sails furled, and once more they leapt towards their goal at the front tip of a mile-long jet of heated water.

Bracy, although he had been very willing to start on this mission, and at the outset was delighted with what had been done to his craft, grew bored within a few hours. Maddalena had shown him the operation of everything, including the devices which had no connection with seafaring, in order to entertain him, but the fact that control of his vessel had been given over to machinery disturbed him, and he sat with a worried expression staring at the wake and listening with head cocked to the hum of power emanating from below.

What was chiefly worrying him, Maddalena puzzled out at last, was not being able to see where they were going with his own eyes; he had known of radar, of course—some of the wealthier fishing-families in Gratignol could afford both it and a fish-finder, whereas the poor families had to settle for the latter only—but the little screen was no psychological equivalent for eyesight.

It was, naturally, out of the question to go on deck with a hundred-fifty-knot wind howling past them; they were only able to sit in the after cockpit because the fairing over the cabin had been subtly altered to make it aerodynamically efficient at these speeds. But when Bracy showed signs of real distress at this headlong career, she decided they might risk running for a while on manual control, to show that the ultimate responsibility had not been ceded to the machines.

That was almost the last decision she took in life. Some enormous marine creature—not a wolfshark, but nearly as large and quite as solid—showed up on the fish-finder, and seeing such a huge obstacle dead ahead Bracy yelled with alarm and put the helm hard over. The boat dipped its side in the water, because the foils could not cope with such a violent change of direction, and for half a mile they

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skidded in a tight circle with spray streaming over the deck and great shuddering slams of water battering the hull.

By the time Maddalena got the helm away from him and let the boat straighten of her own accord, the cause of the trouble was miles astern. But that was the last attempt the fisherboy made to control his craft at its new maximum velocity.

Especially when they were compelled to slow to avoid comment on sighting other ships, Maddalena had a good deal of time to talk to the boy, and by the end of the voyage had come to like him a great deal. Faced with such problems as he had, many youths would have given up at once; instead, orphaned, with nothing but this trawler as a means of livelihood, he had grimly set out to replace two healthy, hard-working adults with decades of seafaring experience. That sort of thing took guts of a different kind than those needed to save one from panic at the sight of strange armored figures chasing a hospital patient through a nightmare of menacing machinery. She had thought of him entirely as an instrument, a way to escape the surveillance of the Cyclopeans and follow Kolb to Rimerley's island; now at last she came to see him as a person—shy, ambitious and intensely proud.

Also, handicapped as he was by his overdose of radiation, he had the kind of tough persistence legend attributed to the pregalactic coolie — half-starved, half-frozen, dressed in rags, he maintained unstoppable energy.

By the time they came over the horizon to Rimerley's island, and accordingly had to slow to typical trawler speed to escape notice, she had extensively revised her original plan and spent a couple of hours before nightfall and the landing in briefing him with the new instructions.

IT was ironical that they should be able to drift with the current here, in plain view, Maddalena thought as she surveyed the doctor's private domain. So much the better, though—to have had to wait till dark before coming into line-of-sight would have imposed extra difficulties.

With a powerful magnifying periscope which had been built into the mast of the trawler and projected a needle-sharp image on a screen at the bottom, she studied the prospect before her. Clearly, Rimerley was one of Cyclops's "top twentieth", as Gus Langenschmidt called them—indeed, he must be among the thousand wealthiest men on the planet to maintain premises like these. A huge house, part of it extending out into the ocean so that one could enjoy the sensa-

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tion of being in a vast aquarium by descending a short flight of steps; a private dockyard with two skimmers at the quay; a 'copter parked behind the house, and beyond that a road winding up to the topmost point on the island, where trees concealed the ground.

If it was true that he had built his fortune by selling the spare parts of human beings, he must have run through scores—possibly hundreds—of victims, Maddalena thought, and the realization made her stomach churn with nausea.

Faint from below came the sound of martial music, and then a voice too muted for her to catch the words, but having a distinctly coaxing tone. Bracy was playing with the radio again. Though his family had had one before his parents died, he had had to sell it, he told her, during the hungry month of last winter, and in any case the one which the Corps had fitted aboard the trawler was far superior to any in Gratignol.

She continued her study of the land ahead, looking for signs of life. Some turned up: a man came back from taking in fishlines, carrying a large basket of gleaming sea-creatures; a man in white, probably a mechanic, came out to attend to some job on the 'copter and went into the house again.

"Bracy!" she called.

"Just a moment." There was a pause, and then he put his head out of the cockpit. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry—were you listening to something?"

The boy's lip curled. "A government announcement. The man was saying how the closing of your base would make life more difficult, but we must think of our poor brothers on the refugee planets. What I want to know is, why are they so eager to have more poor people to cope with when they can't even give us a decent living?"

Good question, Maddalena commented silently. During the voyage Bracy had plied her with questions about Cyclops and other planets, and had shown a surprising degree of natural insight into the problems they discussed. Most likely, Maddalena assumed, his parents had been comparatively literate as Cyclopean fisherfolk went, and had done their best to pass on their education to their son.

"You wanted something?" Bracy added.

"Yes. I want to find out if there's any communication going on between the island and some other part of the planet. There's a device for doing that among the equipment below. I showed you how it works—do you think you can remember the details?"

"Yes, I think so. If I can't, I'll be honest." He vanished again.

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SHE chuckled, resuming her examination of the island's image. Shortly, he called back to her.

"No, there are no communicators operating as close as that. The nearest is over to the eastward—I think it's a pleasure-boat acknowledging an alteration of schedule."

"Good—thank you. Now how about internal communicators?"

"Right!"

And within minutes: "Maddalena! There's a conversation going on I think you might like to hear."

She rose in a lithe movement and dropped through the open hatch. A voice was coming from the remote tapper which enabled eavesdropping on room-to-room communicators at distances up to ten miles.

"—everything ready by midnight," the crisp words rang out. "Now there must be no delays! I know I always say that, but tonight is more crucial than usual, even. We must have the entire job finished within half an hour."

A different voice said, "With this quarantine and embargo business, what happens if they recognize an unscheduled landing and take it for a Corps intrusion?"

Maddalena tensed.

"They won't!" the first voice snapped. "It's not an unscheduled landing. This one is for Quist, remember? And I got her to have it officially scheduled. I don't know what it's being called—luxury goods for private consumption, I think—"

An appreciative though fawning laugh broke in, and a muttered, "Very good, very good!"

"So!" the first speaker said. "Anything else?"

"No, I guess not."

"Get on with it, then."

The tapper went silent; there were no communicators in use on the island any longer.

"What was all that about?" Bracy demanded, staring.

"Something is going to be brought down from space, for Quist," Maddalena said. "At about midnight. That much is clear, but exactly what—"

She broke off, a light dawning. Langenschmidt had mentioned to her his half-formed suspicion that the ultimatum for evacuation of the Corps base might be connected with Kolb's leg and the risk of its origin being discovered, but he had been unable to see what link could compel Quist into action. Suppose, though, it wasn't a matter of compulsion, but of bribery; suppose she was due to become one of Rimerley's customers for the renewal of some failing organ—from her recorded image at the Non-Interference Conference it was plain she was no longer youthful—and Rimerley had told

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her that she would lose her chance if the Corps cut off the supply of spare parts . . .

"That *must* be it!" she exclaimed, and ignoring Bracy's bewilderment she dived for the subspace communicator which was her link with the Corps. The bands it used were untappable, as far as was known, by any equipment on Cyclops, but just in case Corps intelligence was faulty in that area there was an automatic scrambler on the circuit as well.

"Maddalena Santos," she said as soon as she had her connection. "I want to speak to Commandant Langenschmidt."

"I'm sorry," came the smooth reply. "The commandant has been called off the planet for a conference on redeployment of base personnel."

"Damn—already? Then give me whoever's acting for him."

"Dr. Nole is the senior officer at present on duty, but he's engaged with the Cyclopean inspection team at the hospital. Is there anyone else you wish to speak to?"

"Not particularly," Maddalena sighed. "Wait a second, though, I have an idea. Can you record a scrambled message and get it to Langenschmidt for me?"

"Yes, certainly. Just one moment." A series of clicks; then —"Go ahead now, please. Recording."

In terse words Maddalena summed up her suspicions and ended, "By the way, Gus! Since you're so sure you'll be back as soon as the Cyclopeans feel the pinch, why not try and con the authorities into assigning this evacuation fleet to search for the unknown ZRP, instead of just tamely spreading our personnel here over a dozen bases and leaving it at that? It's going to take at least thirty ships to shift what's being lifted away—half that number could carry out a thorough sweep of the high-probability locations.

"Of course, knowing you, that's probably exactly what you're doing at the moment."

She closed the message and thanked the Corps operator. Then she turned to Bracy.

"Can you use an energy gun?" she demanded.

The boy shook his head.

"I think I'll pass the next half hour teaching you. Whatever's being brought down here at midnight is valuable, and if we interfere there may be trouble. Lucky I brought a spare gun along, isn't it?"

XVIII

DARKNESS closed around the boat, still drifting as any fishing-boat might when awaiting the arrival of a shoal along the line of a nutrient-rich current.

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"That makes us effectively invisible to the naked eye," Maddalena muttered. "Now let's make ourselves invisible to his burglar alarms, and we can go ashore."

Bracy had tried and failed to comprehend the concepts behind this cryptic statement. He put out his arm passively, and Maddalena strapped a miniature radio beacon around it.

She had programmed a geepee computer for the task of making them electronically invisible, and it was perhaps the neatest trick of all those they were using. Essentially she had shifted frequencies on the tapper and connected both it and the computer to an ultra-tight-beam transmitter. The beacons would show their location at any given moment; the tapper would indicate on what band the detectors were operating, and the transmitter would put out an eddy current, so to speak, which would confuse the circuits in the detectors and cause them to record something as diffuse and harmless as a patch of sea-mist. The fact that slight mist usually followed sundown at these latitudes in summer was an additional advantage.

"Remember, though," Maddalena admonished Bracy sternly, "even if it is pitch dark, and you're masked for the detectors, you can still make noise, and that'll give us away. Be careful."

Bracy nodded and grinned. The grin vanished as he glanced down at the butt of his energy gun, protruding from its waterproof holster. Maddalena felt a twinge of worry—was it wise to have given him the weapon when any instruction had necessarily to be theoretical? She had restrained him from firing it only with difficulty, but she dared not let him see a bolt actually fired—energy guns were not the sort of weapons common fisherfolk could afford, and their discharge was extremely conspicuous, especially over water where they raised a wall of steam fifty or more feet high.

Too late to change her mind now—time was wasting, and well before midnight they had to explore the house, the nearby estate and the high ground behind, among the trees. For that, in Maddalena's judgment, was the only place a spaceship could put down near here, unless it landed on water, and that too was an attention-getting event attended by clouds of spray and high waves.

Almost certainly among the trees, she had concluded. And going at a snail's pace, it would take a couple of hours to carry out their preliminary survey, let alone prepare counteraction against Rimerley and his staff.

"Anchor!" she told Bracy.

Silent as a ghost, he lowered

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it to the bottom and gave a cautious tug to ensure it had gripped. On his whispered confirmation, Maddalena let herself over the side and, using a stroke that created minimum disturbance in the water, set off for the shore.

THERE were lights on in the extension of the house that ran along the sea-bed, but the room within was empty. On a low table lay the remains of a meal—the eater, apparently, had had little appetite tonight. Through windows higher up, women could be seen moving about—three of them in all, one in white, the others in dark green gowns.

Maddalena led Bracy some distance along the shore before heading inland. She had already got a clear idea of the layout of the house: the seaward side was the owner's, the landward included servants' quarters and all the domestic and mechanical offices. There seemed to be no trace of children; presumably either Rimerley was unmarried or he maintained a separate establishment elsewhere. Or, of course, he might be old enough to have children already grown—she had somehow been thinking of him as a young man, greedy and ruthless, rather than an old man, merely callous.

Their first stop was the dock where the skimmers were moored. No one noticed them as they bent over first one, then the other, of the graceful craft. From there, they went to the 'copter. The mechanic was just finishing his job, wiping his hands and putting away some tools. They waited for five minutes to let him get clear, and then Maddalena tossed a small sticky object at the side of the machine. It clung as it touched.

Now, anyone attempting to leave the island by skimmer or 'copter would attract the unwelcome attention of a homing rocket with a shaped-charge head, unless he was sufficiently clever to remove the sticky objects Maddalena had planted.

Which she doubted. The said person was more likely to be in a flat panic.

"Door shut," Maddalena whispered very softly. "Now the ventilators."

The house's airconditioning system was quite conspicuous from the trawler: two high circulating stacks led down to the pump-chamber on the roof. Bracy had assured her that he, accustomed to grappling with solar sails in unexpected gales of wind, could get to the top easily; nonetheless, she waited with heart in mouth and hand on gun while he scaled the intake stack and placed at the top the three glass canisters tied into a bundle with an explosive cord which she had

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given him. There was a radio-activated fuse on the end of the cord.

She had been puzzling for some time over the matter of where Justin Kolb would be located; it wasn't until she was planning this job on the airconditioning that she saw the most likely possibility. Any sensible doctor taking patients into his private dwelling would put them at the terminal end of the air-circulation system, in case they had infections which draughts could carry to the other occupants. As soon as Bracy had come down safely, she told him to keep watch for her and approached the window of the room adjacent to the base of the discharge stack.

And there he was, in a large room full of medical equipment, watching a musical recording and eating a light supper. No one else was in the room with him, but there were open communicators on both sides of the bed, and a medical scanner was focused on his torso.

Her original plan had ended with the location of Justin Kolb and his removal to a point from which the Corps could send down a ship to retrieve him, and she was glad that she had acquired information leading to a change of plan. It would have been far too easy, as she had envisaged it. Just fire the radio-fuse, wait ten minutes until everyone in the house was unconscious, smash a way in to bring Kolb to the boat, and—end.

Tame. This way was much better.

SHE had seen enough of the house now, and led Bracy away from it towards the high ground. They kept a course parallel to the road, but out of sight of it—a precaution she was glad of when a fast ground-skimmer hummed up from the house to the concealing trees ahead, and within minutes came back.

The trees were thickly leaved and prickly, some local species she hadn't been warned about; before Bracy was able to show her how to avoid the dropping branches, she sustained several scratches on her face. They made the last stretch of their journey interminably slow, but at length they emerged into sight of a small plateau crowning the island.

Maddalena pursed her lips. Even without more help than starlight, she could see that this was one of the best-equipped private landing-grounds she had ever heard of. A squat building dominated it, with an impressive array of antennae on top, including one unmistakable one meant for subspace communication over interstellar distances—a real shock, to find that sort of equipment here. Maybe the Cy-

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clopean government *was* conniving at Rimerley's actions!

And what could it be that was expected at or soon after midnight? A new leg for Justin Kolb? Such a gruesome piece of evidence as that would be enough to convict Rimerley and his associates even in a Cyclopean court, let alone a galactic one!

"What now?" Bracy whispered, touching her arm to attract her attention.

"I'm going to try and plan an ambush for the people who are coming from space," Maddalena told him, equally softly. "I don't know how many there may be of them, nor how many of the staff from the house will come with Rimerley to greet the ship. Those who stay behind, of course, won't pose any problems . . . Oh, damnation!"

She clapped her hand to her forehead.

"What's wrong?" Bracy demanded. He had put on a wolfish grin at the thought of what was to hold back those in the house from interfering—it was a trick that tickled him immensely, especially since he had had personal experience of the same brand of anaesthetic gas when he was cornered in the operations control room of the Corps base. The grin had vanished immediately Maddalena let out her stifled exclamation.

"Rimerley may not come up here by ground-skimmer. He may prefer to use the 'copter, and if he does, it'll be brought down instantly. I'll have to go back and unbug the damned thing!"

"Let me go," Bracy suggested.

She hesitated. But so far he had shown himself reliable, and after all there was little time now . . .

"Okay!" she decided. "All you have to do is get close enough to take off the sticky thing—you saw where I threw it?"

"Yes. I can do it quickly and come back soon!"

"Good luck!" she shot after him as he disappeared.

Then, furious with her own excess of ingenuity, she set off on a tour of the miniature spaceport, looking for the best hiding-places and points of vantage. To ambush the crew of an interstellar ship with only two persons was a tall order, but there was equipment in the ship which should make it possible, if she could get back there, collect it, and get it installed in time . . . What was keeping Bracy? Was it necessary to wait for him—could she not meet him on the way back to the shore and save time?

Better not.

The stars crept around the sky towards the midnight configuration, and still no Bracy. With a start she realized that if he took any longer it would already be

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too late to fetch what she needed from the trawler.

And it was too late! From the direction of the house came the distinctive drone of the 'copter's engines; she could see lights moving around its parking place, and shadowy figures crossing bright lamps.

It began to rise, and for long moments she was imagining the whish and crash of the rocket from the trawler which was keyed to home on the sticky beacon. But nothing happened. The 'copter merely turned towards the tiny spaceport.

There was a rustle in the undergrowth beside her, and she spun, hand slapping the butt of her gun.

"Bracy!" the boy said in alarm, and she recognized him. Furious, she railed at him.

"What kept you? Now we have no time to go to the trawler and get what we need!"

"I'm sorry. I dared not go close. They were working on the machine—fitting something like a tray under its belly. In the end I could not wait any more. I caught one of the men, about my size, as he went out of sight of the others, and did *so*." Graphically, he closed his hand on his own throat and groaned: "Then I took his clothes and went openly to the machine to remove the sticky thing. I was just in time—a man of great importance came from the house to see that all was well with the work. So I went back and killed the man I had taken clothes from, and hid his body. They looked for as long as I was near enough to hear, but I think they will not find him. There is a wolfshark in the bay—did you see it, earlier?"

"No!" Maddalena exclaimed.

"Yes. Not feeding, not followed by buzzards, but they are always hungry for human meat."

Maddalena digested that information as well as she could.

"What now?" Bracy pressed her.

She shrugged. "We play by ear, I guess."

"What?"

"Never mind. Watch, and listen, and take your orders from my signals. We shall simply have to do as well as we can with two energy guns and the advantage of surprise."

She motioned him silent, for the 'copter was humming down over the treetops, and the last scene of the night's drama was all set.

XIX

AS the ship slanted through the fringes of the air, Lors Heimdall wondered grimly just how much of his explanation his men had believed. He'd told them that this deal was so profitable they could afford to return home

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ahead of schedule, and there weren't likely to be many complaints about that—the natives could get along without Receivers of the Sick for a while, until the next time some death-fearing client put in for a new heart or some wealthy idiot crossed up another wolfshark, like Justin Kolb.

Nonetheless, it was quite unprecedented in the history of their venture to pull the entire team off the ZRP and go home *en masse*.

He'd taken the decision to do this in cold blood. If by any chance Rimerley had been wrong in his estimate of the effect on the Corps of Quist's ultimatum, and some too-nosy doctor had thought to check the gene-type of Kolb's leg, he didn't want to be trapped by the Patrol on a noisome, dirty, mud-grubbing planet not worth a snap of the fingers.

There wasn't any question of cancelling their long-term plans completely, of course. In a few years more, he himself would inevitably become a customer for Rimerley's skilled attentions—sometimes, after great effort, he found it hard to breathe, and knew that his lungs and bronchi were aging. And why should he squander most of his hard-earned fortune on a trip to some prosperous world, for medical treatment, when he was indispensable to Rimerley and could persuade the doctor to overhaul him without charge?

All this aside, though, he did wonder very seriously whether his men had not guessed the truth behind his order to pull out.

It was lucky the trip was such a short one; the ship was crowded, and in a confined space tempers could easily be rubbed raw.

Also there was the girl, who was indisputably attractive, and most of the men hadn't been able to overcome their revulsion against dirt and take themselves a native woman during their stay on the ZRP. Yes: the shortness of the journey was something to be thankful for.

"They're waiting for us at the landing ground," the pilot reported unnecessarily. "I'm going straight in."

"You're watching out for Patrol ships? With the evacuation of the Corps base, I'd expected local space to be crawling with them."

"They're over the shoulder of the planet," the pilot grunted. "Two, two and a half thousand miles from where we're setting down."

Not a hitch. Heimdall found himself relaxing from unnoticed tension.

Everything, indeed, went with such smoothness that he was almost disappointed to have wasted so much energy on needless

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apprehension. The ship settled with hardly a bump—the pilot had become accustomed to rough landings on the ZRP, and this was the next best thing to a public spaceport. Heimdall was already at the port when the all-clear lamps winked on, and the panels slid back to reveal the night outside, and a few glinting lights silhouetting a parked 'copter with a group of four men close by.

"Wait a moment!" Heimdall snapped to those of his own team who were excessively eager to jump down, and called in a low voice across the field. "Doctor?"

"Here I am," Rimerley answered. "You weren't bothered, were you?"

"No, no challenges—nothing. Can you take the girl down in the 'copter? I've kept her in coma all the way."

"Yes, there's a cradle slung for her stretcher. Get her over here quickly and we'll take her to the house. Then I'll come back for you."

"Right!" Heimdall turned and gestured curtly for the girl to be carried to the lock. He thought it as well not to tell Rimerley yet that there would have to be at least three trips with the 'copter to bring down all the men who had returned with him.

Soraya was carried by two complaining bearers over to the 'copter and placed in the cradle. Heimdall walked with her, and as soon as the job was done nodded to Rimerley.

"Off you go—but don't be too long over sending back the 'copter, will you?"

Rimerley, edgy, caught a false note in the words, and gave him a long hard stare. Then he walked a few paces away, beyond the pool of light in which the 'copter rested, so that he could see the dim glow of the ship's lock. There were more craning, peering heads in view than there ought to have been.

"Heimdall, have you brought your whole damned team with you?" he rasped.

Heimdall took a deep breath. "Yes. And we're not going back till the pressure is off."

Startled, the men who had come up with Rimerley closed on their boss; similarly, catching Heimdall's words and finding their half-formed suspicions confirmed, everyone from the ship came scrambling out of the lock and hurried to ask frantic questions. There was a babbling argument within seconds, and accusations and counter-accusations poured out as though a dam had burst.

Couldn't be better, Maddalena thought. *That's everyone from the ship outside now, I'll bet on it—there simply wouldn't be room for any more. And they*

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said something about bringing a girl with them. From the ZRP, beyond doubt.

She nudged Bracy, who slipped away into the darkness a score of paces, and as soon as he was at his appointed position she rose to her feet.

THE voice rang out with shocking authority, amplified to ten times natural volume. "Stand still, all of you! I am an executive officer of the Corps Galactica, and you are under arrests for violations of the Unified Galactic Code!"

The effect of the roaring order was all Maddalena had hoped for. Long seconds passed with everyone on the port immobilized by shock; during the passage of those seconds, she pressed the little button on a device clipped to her belt and transmitted the signal which would explode the cord tying the three glass cylinders together at the top of the intake stack supplying the house's air. Enough anaesthetic to knock out an army flowed sluggishly down to the ventilators.

Then the man whom she had managed to identify as Rimerley —quicker-witted than his companions—broke from the group and ran hell-bent for the 'copter. Shouts greeted this act, and someone with good sense yelled, "Stop him!"

"Patrol Probationer Bracy!" Maddalena shouted into her loudhailer. "Disable that helicopter!"

And for pity's sake, do it without injuring the girl slung underneath!

She thought he would never respond, and was lifting her own gun when at last he did.

Perfect.

He had displayed the unexpected good sense not to hurry over this first use of his weapon; he had remained calm enough to sight as he had been told, to steady his arm, hold his breath, and only then let go the bolt.

It blazed across the field, illuminating the entire island as brilliantly as lightning, and sheared away the rotor from the 'copter just as Rimerley got the power on and turned the blades into a shimmering disc.

Droplets of molten metal shattered the transparent roof of the pilot compartment into shards of opaque plastic, and Rimerley screamed like a frightened beast. But it was unlikely the girl, protected by the craft's hull, had suffered any hurt.

"Thank you, Bracy," Maddalena said at full volume. "The rest of you, stay where you are, and if one of these disgusting butchers makes a move, or tries to run for it, burn him, understood? Bracy, come over and help me disarm them."

There was a powerful psycho-

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logical impact in the unleashed violence of an energy gun, even to people raised on Cyclops, where violence was far commoner than on most civilized worlds. Sullen, sick-faced with terror, the cluster of men waited as patiently as cattle in a slaughterhouse for Bracy and Maddalena to come up to them. Bracy was grinning all over his face, he was so pleased with his contribution to the night's work; Maddalena had to scowl ferociously before he smoothed his features into a pattern more suited to a probationer on official business.

THE technique Maddalena had devised for this stage of the proceedings worked beautifully. Bracy came up to each man in turn, gun in his right hand, palming in his left an anaesthetic capsule with a self-injector attached. He clapped the victim on the shoulder and left the capsule sticking to the flesh while he withdrew any weapon the man had at his belt: in all, four of them had arms. A look of vague surprise would cross the man's face, and he would slump about half a minute later.

Meantime, Maddalena had gone over to the 'copter, playing a handlight on the wreckage. Rimerley was sitting still and moaning. Below him, the girl lay uncaring, long black hair draped over the end of the stretcher.

Hmmm . . . Very pretty. I wonder if they were going to—dismantle her for spares!

But she had no time for such gruesome reflections. There was a cry from behind her, and she whirled. The tall, cruel-nosed man who had supervised the bringing of the girl from the ship—Heimdall, Rimerley had called him—had broken from the group and was dashing towards the dark shelter of the trees. Bracy had loosed a bolt at him, and fired wide.

Maddalena's gun was up on the instant, and her bolt did not miss.

Those of the group who were still conscious gaped, and then, in comical unison, doubled up to vomit on the ground. At this range, the powerful energy gun turned a man into a handful of calcined bones, and a smell, sickeningly delicious, of well-roasted meat . . .

Maddalena waited till she was sure Bracy had the situation under control again, holstered her gun, and turned back to Rimerley. He had regained some of his self-possession, and was bleating into the communicator, trying to raise his staff back at the house.

"That won't do you any good," Maddalena said curtly. "I gassed the house before I came here, and they'll sleep till morning. Come on—get down from there!"

Like a badly operated marion-

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ette, Rimerley complied, falling awkwardly and twisting his ankle. He limped when Maddalena ordered him to move towards his colleagues, and made a whimpering complaint about such treatment.

"If you complain once more," Maddalena told him stonily, "I'll take a leg off you, the way you did to the poor bastard who provided a graft for Justin Kolb. Is that clear?"

Rimerley gulped enormously, and began to waddle hastily forward.

"That's the lot," Bracy said proudly, indicating the scattered forms on the ground. "And I've piled their guns over there."

"Excellent," Maddalena said. "I never thought we'd do it, to be frank. You've been quite amazing." She clapped him on the shoulder, forgetful for the moment of what he had just been doing, and was first startled, then amused, when he put up his hand anxiously to make certain it was not the end of his usefulness and his turn to be knocked unconscious.

Rimerley, breathing raggedly, fought to recover his dignity. He said, "I demand to know by what right you—"

"I told you," Maddalena snapped. "If you want specific charges, the main one will probably be murder, and the subsidiary will be interference with a Zarathustra Refugee Planet."

Rimerley gave an oily smile. He said, "My government contests the legality of the non-interference rule, as you ought to know. And this planet recognizes the right of euthanasia. If you're assuming that we committed murder to obtain the grafts we have employed, you're wrong. I can show you a release for each of the donors, agreeing to euthanasia because of incurable illness or serious injury."

"Including the girl over there?" Maddalena countered, and saw with satisfaction the look of horror that wiped away the doctor's smile.

"What now?" Bracy pressed her.

"Well, since they've been so kind as to provide the means," Maddalena said, "I think we might as well go directly to see Commandant Langenschmidt. I haven't flown a spaceship for several years, but I was taught how in Corps indoctrination, and they say what the Corps teaches you can never be forgotten. Want to try space for a change, Bracy?"

The boy hesitated. Then self-respect overcame his doubts, and he put his shoulders back and nodded vigorously.

"Then help me drag this load of carrion aboard, and we'll be on our way in short order," Maddalena said.

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XX

THE ship bringing the three-member board of inquiry from Earth, which had put the parsecs behind it at a speed to make light look like a tired snail, dropped into its assigned slot at the Cyclops base. The three board members emerged: Senior General Lyla Baden, small of build but large of voice, and two colonels—a staff rank, indicating that they had not served in the Patrol, but had spent their entire careers in administration.

"General Baden?" said Dr Anstey Nole, stepping forward to greet them. "My name is Nole, second senior officer at present."

General Baden looked at her surroundings with an icy blue eye. She said at length, "You're under ultimatum to leave this base by tomorrow at latest, are you not? Where are your preparations for departure?"

Indeed, it was obvious to the most casual glance that the work of the base was proceeding normally—far from tearing down the installations, men and robots were at work on repair and renovation, a fact which had given the Cyclopean inspectors a bad time recently. It made them feel peculiarly helpless, for there was nothing whatever a backward world like Cyclops could do against the Corps if it decided to dig in its heels.

Major Barly strode forward from where he had been standing, next to Nole. "I want to register the strongest possible protest against the defiant behavior of your base commandant!" he thundered. "Until yesterday he was according us full co-operation. Then suddenly he turned about and countermanded all his orders, and refused to see me and explain his high-handed obstinacy."

"Hmmm!" General Baden looked him over. "Who are you?"

"My apologies." Barly recollected himself and clicked his heels. "Bengt Barly, Major, Cyclops Space Force, assigned to supervise the evacuation of this base."

"I see. Where is this commandant now? Why didn't he come down to meet us on our arrival?" A chill pervaded the general's words.

"Commandant Langenschmidt is awaiting you in his villa, General," Nole said calmly. "I am asked to take you there at once."

"Carry on, then," the general said grimly. "I shall want an explanation—and it will have to be a good one."

Langenschmidt greeted the newcomers with a mask of inscrutability. He was not alone in the room where he received them. In addition to six armed Corpsmen, there were an aging man

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who looked to be ill from some cause subtler than disease—possibly fear—a youth who held himself as erect as a Corpsman but clearly wasn't, for his hair was completely shaven, not trimmed to the Patrol's standard inch, a very young girl with dark hair and wide, doe-like eyes full of alarm, and a woman in undress Corps uniform around whose mouth played the suspicion of a smile.

Without preamble, General Baden said, "I'm told by the head of the Cyclopean inspection team that you've countermanded the orders to evacuate. Why?"

Not twitching an eyelid, Langenschmidt retorted, "Because the base is not going to be closed. Furthermore, I intend to ask that the ships assigned to transport our personnel away, which are released from that duty now, be reassigned to me for a special task." He paused. "In fact, I think about half the total number of ships will suffice—the rest can return to regular duty."

"Have you taken leave of your senses, man?" rapped the general, emphasizing the last word as though she had long ago ceased to expect intelligence in members of the opposite sex.

"General, if you'd sit down—? Chairs!" Langenschmidt barked, and the Corpsmen moved hastily to bring some. "I think you need only listen to me for a few minutes to see I know what I'm talking about. I'd like to start by introducing all those present, if I may. Ah—Maddalena Santos here is attached to my staff for special duties, and I'll be asking you to take back with you a commendation in her name for diligence above the call of duty—but that's by the way. This young man here is a Cyclopean fisherboy from a place called Gratignol, Bracy Dyge; he has applied for probationer status in the Corps and has so conducted himself as to earn my maximum approval for the application."

Bracy grinned broadly and went back to the pastime mainly engaging his attention at the moment: looking at the slender, attractive girl next to him.

"This," Langenschmidt continued, "is Dr. Aleazar Rimerley, who is not here under quite such favorable auspices. He is in fact under arrest for systematic and flagrant violation of several clauses of the Unified Galactic Code, details of which I shall be giving to you.

"And this—child, I think one must say," he concluded, turning, "is named Soraya. She does not understand much of what we are saying, which is hardly surprising—she wasn't brought up to speak pure Galactic, but an Irani dialect with some Galactic admixtures. She is, in fact"—and he looked straight at Gen-

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eral Baden, wanting to see the full impact of his bombshell—"a native of ZRP Number Twenty-two, whose location we haven't yet established, but which narrows down to a thirty-parsec sphere now, and—"

"Twenty-two?" echoed the general in a strangled voice.

"But—" said both colonels simultaneously.

Langenschmidt let his face relax at last, into a beaming smile. "Have I your permission to explain my actions now?"

IT had been decided at the last moment to make the closing session of the Conference on Non-Interference with Zarathustra Refugee Planets a public affair, with as much pomp and spectacle as Cyclopean resources could furnish at short notice, and full coverage by the planet's news services. There was much adulation of Omar Haust, the living representative of those who on untamed worlds struggled to wrest a precarious living from a hostile environment—at least, that was how Quist's speech compositor put it, and she was far too preoccupied to worry about the phrase herself. But there were some worried faces in the public seats, where Cyclopean notables, hurriedly summoned to show themselves, sat listening and scrutinizing the offworld delegates arranged at a long table on the dais of the conference hall.

The matter troubling Quist was the same as it had been since she first yielded to Rimerley's irresistible bribe: would or would not the Corps leave enough salvageable material to balance the planetary budget this year, while they cast around for some other external revenue to replace what was being thrown away?

Gradually, through her mood of anxiety, a noise from outside the hall began to seep. She started, turning to gaze at the window which offered a view of the large square outside. There, thousands of the city's people were watching on public viewscreens the proceedings of the conference.

They shouldn't be shouting like that. The thought briefly crossed her mind, and as it passed she leapt in amazement from her seat.

Down across the frame of the tall window a monstrous shining shape had moved, like a fish settling through clear water. A spaceship. A spaceship so large that the entire square was barely wide enough to afford it room.

Others in the hall had seen it go by, and the bewildered speaker at the rostrum—one of the lesser delegates from Earth, heaping praise on Cyclops for its noble self-sacrifice—broke off his address. The shouting from

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outside turned to real screaming now.

The ranked notables started to get up, muttering in alarm, and then the scene was frozen by the impact of shock.

The tall main doors of the hall were slammed open—not sliding back into the walls as they were meant to move, but simply hurled from their frames by a tremendous blow from the far side. Over them, with the stolid tramp of machines, came what most of the people present had never seen except in historical recordings: a squadron of the Corps Galactica in full battle equipment, armor tough enough to repel an energy bolt, so heavy that it was driven by miniaturized fission reactors mounted at the back, and polished to more-than-mirror brilliance in every band of the spectrum. The crazy reflections rendered it almost impossible to focus on the wearers, making them seem like nightmare illusions.

That was why Gus Langenschmidt had insisted it be worn. He didn't expect any resistance fierce enough to justify its actual use.

The squadron wheeled right and left and filed around the hall, taking station to surround it entirely, and he came in last of all, striding directly towards Quist where she stood, petrified, among the offworld delegates.

He wanted to get his opening statement out before any of the news technicians regained enough presence of mind to switch off the exterior transmissions.

"Alura Quist," he said, and the words rang around the hall like the knell of doom, "I am Commandant Gustav Langenschmidt, a duly appointed executive of the Corps Galactica, and I arrest you for complicity in the following violations of the Unified Galactic Code, to wit: murder with malice, murder by default, conspiracy to—"

The screaming and panic began then. Langenschmidt paused; his squadron was fully briefed on how to handle this sort of trouble. It took only a few minutes to restore calm, with the local notables sitting white-faced in their chairs, their hands between their knees as though they were trying to shrink and become too small to be seen, the offworld delegates muttering frantic unanswerable questions to each other, and the places of the news technicians taken by Corpsmen to ensure that the transmissions would go on without a break.

LANGENSCHMIDT resumed. "Conspiracy to interfere with the autonomous development of a Zarathustra Refugee Planet, conspiracy with Aleazar

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Rimerley and Lors Heimdall and others to murder one Ekim Hakimi and dismember his corpse, and certain other charges."

He wheeled where he stood, knowing that two armored men had stamped to Quist's side and pinioned her arms, and confronted the cowering Cyclopeans in the public seats. He had intercepted a list of those invited which was supplied to the news service, and knew that all those he would name were present.

"Sophy Alt, I charge you with conspiracy with Aleazar Rimerley and Lors Heimdall and others to kill one Mara Rustum and dismember her corpse. Don Ambonine, I charge you with conspiracy with the same parties to kill one Ali Qurab and dismember his corpse. Ved Conakry, I charge you—"

And so on, the entire miserable tale of Rimerley's rich clients and their miserable victims, until there were more than thirty man and women shivering with terror before him.

Then he handed the documents from which he had been reading to one of his men, threw back his helmet, and strode to the dais. With the entire attention of the city riveted on him, he began.

"People of Cyclops, and in particular you offworld visitors who have come here to attend the conference I so rudely interrupted" —he gave them a sidelong glance and saw they were listening as intently as everyone else—"I want to explain the story behind the shocking scene you have just witnessed.

"You all know about the Zarathustra Refugee Planets. You perhaps also know that many more—perhaps well over a million more—people escaped from the Zarathustra nova than we have to date accounted for.

"Well, we have learned in the past few days that another shipload survived, on a world whose existence was discovered by accident and not notified to my Corps. The discoverer was the captain of a tramp space-freighter, names Lors Heimdall. He was making a somewhat unusual journey along a route served by no regular space-lines, when the strain proved too great for his engines and he was forced to make an emergency landing to conduct repairs on a Class A—that's a tolerably habitable—planet in an unvisited system.

"There, he discovered the descendants of a group of Irani-stock Zarathustrans, making the best of what they had.

"He kept the discovery to himself and his crew, believing that in some way he would eventually be able to exploit this secret. Not long afterwards, his chance occurred. A certain Justin Kolb, celebrated on Cyclops for his part in an accident in space, required

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the replacement of his right leg. Although he was in the care of your planet's leading surgeon, Aleazar Rimerley, the facilities here were not adequate for full-scale limb regeneration, and sending a patient to a more prosperous world is costly.

"Heimdall went to Rimerley with a proposition. He could secure for Kolb a replacement graft, a limb matched closely to his own, for a fraction of the cost of regeneration; Rimerley could charge his client—not Kolb: Alura Quist was paying, out of your planetary funds—the cost of a regeneration, and Heimdall and Rimerley could split the surplus profit.

"Rimerley accepted the offer. And Heimdall secured the limb as promised, by a peculiarly unpleasant deception practised on the unfortunate inhabitants of his private ZRP.

IN the early days of their life there, they had instituted a humane system of quarantine for people suffering from disease beyond their limited resources to cure—and there were plenty of those. Volunteers acted as what they called Receivers of the Sick, to convey them away from their community and the danger of infecting others, and tended them until they recovered or died.

"This system was on the verge of disappearance—so often had the Receivers died of the same illness as their patients, the idea seemed no longer practical. But Heimdall set himself and his men up as a new team of Receivers, worming their way into the natives' confidence and taking away not the truly ill, whom they preferred to disregard, but those whose bodily characteristics rendered them suitable as suppliers of spare parts.

"For Rimerley had seen the possibilities in an unlimited supply of graft material. Not many people on Cyclops are rich, but those who are are disproportionately so—and as greedy for youth as for material wealth. As you have heard, no less than thirty people in this hall have enjoyed the fruits of Rimerley's butchery—new limbs, new eyes, new vital organs!

"It is being pleaded that they did no more than offer euthanasia to the hopelessly sick, a practice recognized here. This is not true. How do we know?

"You may have heard that the Corps base is under orders to close, ostensibly as a symbol of protest against non-interference with ZRP's." He twisted his mouth around the words, and knew the irony was not lost on his hearers. "You may have seen this as an idealistic gesture, since Cyclops can ill afford to lose the revenue from the base. Or you may equally have won-

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dered what possessed Alura Quist to issue her ultimatum.

"She issued it because Rimerley offered her a bribe: a new lease of life. He knew we were within sight of his secret; he thought to provide us with a distraction that would make our half-formed suspicions seem not worth the trouble of investigation. And the bait he dangled before Quist was the body, complete and healthy, of a young girl named Soraya—a source of new organs to replace her failing ones.

"That girl is alive—by a miracle—and in our hands. And she has told how, perfectly well, she was caused to appear to her friends as the victim of a fatal disease, a suitable subject for the ministrations of the Receivers of the Sick. She was not ill at all; she was not offered an easy death under the pretense that she was ill, and incurable—she was simply shipped to Cyclops like an animal to the slaughter."

Langenschmidt paused. "People of Cyclops, it is no part of the Corps' duty to tell you what you should do. But I have worked on your planet for many years, and come to know you at least a little. I am sure you will *know* what you should do."

He turned to look at the pale, trembling conference delegates. "And as for you," he said, "I hardly need say that you have seen a Zarathustra Refugee Planet 'interfered with'. Think it over. And—go home."

For long moments, no one moved. Then, as if in a dream, the old man from ZRP One, Omar Haust, stood up and approached Quist. He looked at her as though at something disgusting found under a stone. Pursed his lips. Spat full in her face.

Langenschmidt snapped his helmet back over his head and gave the signal to his men. They left their stations and went to take hold of the men and women named in the long criminal indictment. Some passive and hopeless, some struggling and yelling hysterically, they were led away.

Last of all, with Langenschmidt at her heels, Quist was taken to endure the execration of her planet's people as she was marched towards the waiting spaceship.

XXI

"MADE up your mind about non-interference?" Langenschmidt said to Maddalena with a tone of false jocularity.

There was no attempt to match it in her reply—depressed, abstracted.

"Gus, that isn't fair. Cyclops isn't a typical civilized planet, and come to that Heimdall and Rimerley aren't typical Cyclopeans."

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"Granted." He looked down from the wall-length window of his villa towards the base, now back in full operation after the cancellation of the evacuation. "On the other hand, they do seem to be typical of those who get power, get influence, get wealth simply because they desire them so greedily. Truly civilized people don't crave power. They have—what would one call it?—empathy, perhaps, which holds them back."

"There's another and much older word," Maddalena said.

"Which is?"

"Conscience." Maddalena stirred as though unable to find a comfortable position on the luxuriously padded seat she was using. "But look at it another way, Gus. It's also empathy which makes me curse when I remember all the poor sick and crippled people I saw on Thirteen—in twenty solid years, remember. You've never had an on-planet assignment lasting longer than weeks, or months. We ought to fix a limit—we ought to say if these people don't show signs of progress within such a time, we'll re-contact them openly and help them."

"Can we define progress?" countered Langenschmidt. "I thought that was one of the basic precepts behind non-interference. We must have lost our sense of direction if we can breed Heimdalls and Rimerleys on a so-called 'civilized world'. Maybe the ZRP's will re-discover what we've lost."

"I've heard all that," Maddalena snapped. "It still doesn't—Well, take a current conspicuous example. That poor girl Soraya had a boy-friend at home, and a sick mother. She was going to be married. We apply the non-interference rule strictly, and forbid her to return to her own planet with the memory of what she's seen since she was kidnapped. Precious little that must be, if she was kept in coma, but there the ruling stands, and I can't say I like it."

"In fact, you've chosen a bad example," Langenschmidt grunted. "Her adoring boy-friend accepted the payment Heimdall offered as a means of keeping the people eager to part with their sick kinfolk, took it home, and was promptly so well off he could take his pick of the eligible girls. And did, within the week."

"What? How do you know?" Disbelieving, Maddalena stared at him.

"Report came in a few hours ago. Using the information supplied by Heimdall's crew, a Corps party dressed up as Receivers of the Sick themselves and went to Soraya's home village. It's going to be a very useful disguise for our permanent

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agents, that—and I think you can rely on the non-interference rule being bent far enough to heal a really deserving case, now and again." He grinned maliciously. "Wouldn't like your next assignment to be on Twenty-two, would you? Or are you leaving the Corps?"

"No—no, I don't think so. Not yet." Maddalena's attention had been caught by two figures moving beyond the window: a youth and a girl with long black hair. "Is that Bracy and Soraya out there?"

"Haven't you noticed how much time they're spending together? I took Bracy aside and told him what she'd been through, and gave him his first Corps assignment—looking after her. Not that he needed orders."

"He's already had his first Corps assignment. With me."

"He hadn't even applied for probationary status then—except verbally, to Nole, and that doesn't count. This time it's official: rehabilitation of victim of criminal assault."

Maddalena laughed. "Damn you, Gus! Why do you have to be such a nice guy?"

"Long practice," he retorted.

"You're also an idiot, but that must be congenital." Maddalena's face clouded again. "Seriously, you know . . . I had had it in mind to apply for another on-planet posting. In spite of what I said when I first came here. But I feel I wouldn't be able to tackle the job objectively. I've been so submerged in dirt and disease and stupidity and barbarism I'm in danger of thinking of galactic civilization as the next thing to paradise. Well, I guess in some senses it is, but it isn't *my* idea of paradise. Gus, I'd like to postpone my leave—I can, if I wish. I don't much want to go back to Earth—if I was attached to my home world, I'd never have left it in the first place. At this distance it seems like an illusion. But planets like Cyclops are all too real. Could you bear to have me on your staff—say for a year—while I catch up on reality by degrees?"

"I'd be honored," Langenschmidt said. "Do you know something? Long ago—I hadn't thought of it in years until I spoke to Pavel Brzeska the other day—I told him I thought you were going to make history eventually, and I'd like to be around when it happened. Well, twenty years passed and—no history to speak of. And then suddenly you orbit back into my sector and things happen. I want to thank you for staying your hand until I was present as a witness and could have my wish granted."

"You're an idiot," Maddalena said fondly, and put out her fingers to touch his.

THE END

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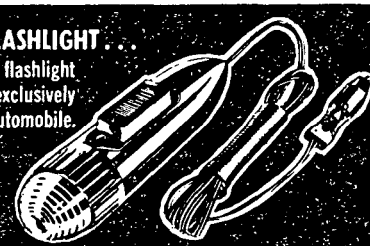

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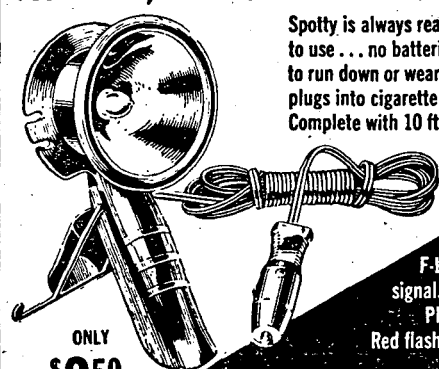

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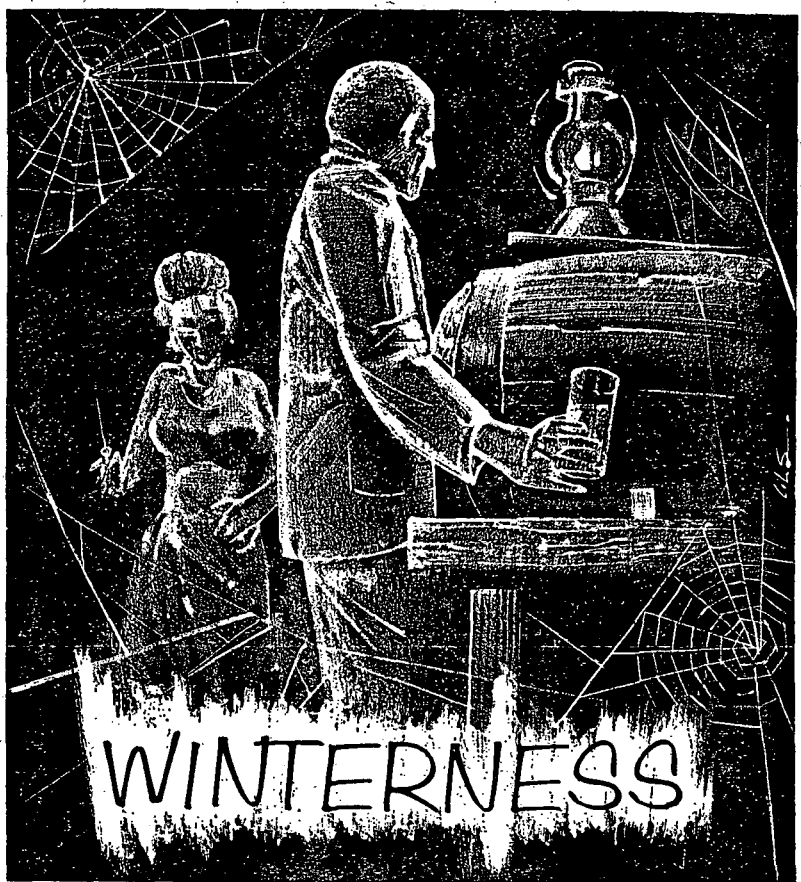

By RON GOULART

Illustrator SCHELLING

When dealing with the spirit world, you can do things three ways: rarely, well-done or medium. When a vanished judge and a buxom columnist are involved, it is perhaps better to settle for the medium.

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THE gargoyle stepped out of the clock. As it chopped at the gong Thomas Guthrie Winterness set his teacup on the marble-topped table at his elbow and took out his filigreed pocket watch. "I renounced a promise-laden career as manager of the family penny arcade to go into my current field," he said, sliding the watch away.

The striking auburn haired young woman on the purple couch opposite him smiled. "I imagine there's a certain similarity between your calling and my courting of the muse."

Winterness spread the fingers of his left hand on his high baby pink forehead. "Mrs. Berfect," he said, letting the fingers inch up into his long blond hair, "grinding out *Clarinda; or, A Romance Of The Ranchos* required a different kind of patience and endurance."

Ella Warchase Berfect blushed. "I was presumptuous."

There was a tambourine on the cushion next to Winterness. He poked at it with one smooth plump finger. "Those hooligans," he said. "There I was, Mrs. Berfect, gaining no small reputation as Yale's most attractive coxwain and suddenly the other world broke through."

"Still," Ella said, glancing at the hallway, "it is a wonderful gift."

The small taut man jumped up and circled the Berfect's large parlor. He tugged his watch out again. To the room he said, "Fun is fun. Winterness isn't going to cool his heels all day." He stopped at the piano bench and rested a knee on it. "I let them talk me into making house calls and then they get prankish."

"Which control are you waiting for today?" asked Ella.

"Right now I don't care. For your problem anyone over there will do."

Ella lowered her eyes. "Still, Mr. Winterness. *Venetia; or Led Where Love Compels* is one of my most ambitious novels to date. I wouldn't want just any spirit to help me on the plot snags."

Winterness said, "In Detroit I knew the man who wrote, under the name of Colonel Earl St. Clair, the Dick Demonways novels. His wife turned out books of verse with such titles as *Leaves From A North Carolina Girl's Dreambook.* It was not a happy pairing."

"I know you think my husband's novels are more enjoyable than mine."

"Yes, I have to admit I favor authors such as your husband, Frank Norris and Jack London." Winterness moved back to the couch. "If your husband would ever speak to me I'd tell him how much I enjoyed his novel, *Steam.* Not up to his *Soil,* but buoying none the less."

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"Alfred doesn't much believe," said Ella, "in the spirit world."

A two horse carriage went by outside, clopping and squeeking up hill. "Perhaps we can get through to Fred."

"Fred?"

"The Indian chief."

"That's an odd name for an Indian."

"They get eccentric over in spirit land," said Winterness. "He had it legally changed."

"At the seance last month, where we first met, you seemed to have more control over the spirits."

"Oh, no," said Winterness, "they control me, Mrs. Berfect. In fact . . ." He dropped the teacup he had reached for and his short legs shot out stiff in front of him. His large round head fell back against the souvenir antimacassar.

ELLA held her breath for long seconds. Then reached into her sewing basket for the list of questions she had made up to put to the spirits.

"I'm warning you fellows," said Winterness, his eyes closed.

The piano bench jumped once and the lid was flipped up. The piano began to play a loud tune.

"The American Eagle Rag," cried Winterness, jumping up. He seemed himself again. He dived at the piano but the playing went on.

A door slammed in the hallway. Shortly Alfred Manley Berfect was in the parlor, a tall broad man with a full chestnut moustache and middle parted chestnut hair. "Can't you limit yourself to tambourines, Winterness? I won't have that bawdy house music in my home."

"I have a great deal of respect for your work," said Winterness, trying to close the lid of the still thumping piano. "There are passages of great power in *Steam*. I recall a piece in the *Overland Monthly* that outlined perfectly my . . ."

"Whatever means you're using to produce this shabby trick," said Berfect, retying the belt of his dressing gown, "stop it. I'm in mid chapter."

Winterness kicked out at the piano bench. "I have no sway over the spirits. On some of the crisp clear San Francisco afternoons, such as this one, they take to behaving quite badly. I am merely the medium, the spiritual telephone wire, through which they communicate with us."

"Well, get out now and take them with you," said Berfect.

"Alfred," said Ella quietly.

"May I ask what the title of your new book is to be?" Winterness turned his back on the loud ragtime of the piano.

"*Sewage*," said Berfect." Now pack your magic show up and go."

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Winterness said, "Before the spirits got hold of me I wrote several operettas in the manner of Gilbert & Sullivan, save with native American settings. One in particular, *The Vigilantes Of Missouri* was quite . . ."

Berfect caught the small medium by the arm and led him to the hallway. "Out, out."

"We'll chat some other time then," said Winterness. "Now that the ice is broken, so to speak, there are several questions I wish to ask you about *Soil*." He bowed toward Ella and left.

The piano stopped.

Berfect strode to it and began searching it. "I don't want such farces staged in our house again, Ella," he said. He went on his hands and knees, whacking the side of the piano. "He must have slipped his trick wires or whatever out with him." He stood up tall.

Ella was silent.

"And," said her husband, "should you really need help with *Venetia; or Led Where Love Compels* you are free to seek it from me."

Ella's nose wrinkled. "Everyone in your books sweats."

Berfect grabbed up Winterness' discarded tambourine and gave it one angry rattle. He then dropped to his knees, this time near his striking wife. "Forgive me, dearest."

Slowly Ella's slender hands approached his shoulders. "No, Alfred. It is I who should ask your forgiveness, my darling."

Berfect kissed her once tenderly. "Now I must get back to *Sewage*."

Ella sat for the next few minutes with the tambourine in her lap.

IT was nearly dusk when Berfect heard the sound of the combustion engine automobile grow and then stop outside. He set his pen down and read over what he had been writing. Then he got up and slipped out of the dressing gown he always worked in. He fished his jacket up off the straight back chair where Ella didn't like him to hang it.

Among their circle there was only one person with a machine. Lester Ward Hardcase, publisher of the *San Francisco Morning Herald*. Berfect had worked on the Herald from the time of the Theo. Durant case until the Judge Shackamaxon disappearance two years ago. Since then his novels had been successful enough to support them. Of course Ella's books had been doing very well, too. Now and again the tall pearshaped publisher of the Herald came up with a good paying assignment for Berfect. Perhaps he had one now.

When Berfect reached the parlor he found Hardcase there, accompanied by the large blonde

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woman who wrote the Herald's sobsister column, *Balm For The Bewildered Heart*. Hardcase's chief rival, *The Morning Chanticleer*, always referred to Elizabeth Tackaway Hope as Hardcase's great good friend. Readers of the Herald didn't seem to mind having their hearts eased by the rumored mistress of a millionaire publisher.

"Lester, Elizabeth," said Berfect.

Elizabeth smiled and Hardcase rose up, shook hands with Berfect. "Alfred. I've just explained my problem to your wife."

They all sat down. "I'd like to help," said Berfect.

Ella frowned at him.

"Oh," said Hardcase. "This isn't a reporting job, Alfred."

"It isn't a job at all," said Elizabeth, smiling again at Berfect. She had a faintly husky voice. "Lester's indulging himself."

Hardcase said, "If I wanted an opinion, Lizzie, I would have written you a letter signed Forlorn." To Berfect he said, "Actually, Alfred, this is something I wanted Ella's advice on."

Berfect folded his arms.

Ella explained, "He has ghosts."

"Delusions," said Elizabeth. "That's what Teddybear has."

"It's my castle," said Hardcase.

The publisher had, some three years before, caused an entire English castle to be disassembled and brought by steamer to San Francisco. It was all back together now, covering two square blocks of Nob Hill. "You don't mean you think that castle of yours is haunted?" Berfect asked, not looking at his wife.

"There's something."

"When did you get that idea?"

"For the past two weeks," said Hardcase, "there have been ghostly cries, unexplainable metallic sounds and an assortment of other quite obviously unearthly occurrences."

"Why haven't there been ghosts in it from the moment it arrived?" asked Berfect. "You'd expect that with a haunted castle."

"I told him," said Elizabeth, flexing her ample shoulders. "That possibly the ghosts could not afford to come over first class the way the castle did and so it took them longer."

"I'm not a lunatic, Alfred. I'm not easily hoodwinked. I exposed Mayor Bester's milk swindle and the foot cures of the self-styled Doctor Bonfigli. Something is definitely amiss at my place."

"Granted," said Berfect. "However, it will certainly have a logical explanation."

"Two crack Pinkertons have failed to find one."

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Ella coughed. "I've mentioned Thomas Winterness."

"Why?" asked her husband.

"To look into the ghosts," said Ella. "He's cretainly proven himself an expert in dealing with the spirit world."

"What I'd like to do," said Berfect, "is a series of articles exposing Winterness."

"Let's wait until he gets my castle in order."

"You're actually going to consult him?"

"Something must be done, After all, Hardcase Castle is one of San Francisco's showplaces. The ballroom, the dining hall and the wine cellar particularly. No one wants a haunted showplace."

"I particularly admire that wine cellar," said Berfect. "Still I must warn you to have nothing to do with Winterness. He's a fairly competent magician. That's all."

"You'll find," said Elizabeth, "that it's best to let Teddybear follow these things to conclusion."

"Whatever's going on at the castle," said Berfect, "can be cleared up logically. Let me come over and investigate."

Hardcase pursed his lips. "You always were good at getting facts, Alfred. The only story you bogged on was the vanishing of old Judge Schackamaxon."

"I'll devote all tomorrow to your castle."

"I should think," said Elizabeth, "you'd be better occupied with your novels."

"I'm not going to see Winterness hoodwink anyone else," said Berfect.

Hardcase rose. "Good, good. Tomorrow it is, Alfred."

Ella quietly fetched their dusters and goggles and Hardcase and his mistress drove loudly away into the early evening.

"Thank you," said Berfect to Ella, "for standing by me."

"I felt that Mr. Winterness is better equipped to deal with the spirit world."

Berfect left the parlor, returned to his study and crossed out seven long paragraphs.

ALFRED Manley Berfect, on hands and knees, circled the raspy drydust floor of the south turret again. He stood finally and crossed to the narrow window. It was a foggy lowhanging afternoon and the sound of an automobile got mixed with the bell of a street car and the cries of some far off playing children who were probably riding a cable up hill.

Glancing at his hands, Berfect rubbed them together and dust fell away. He'd been roaming Hardcase's castle since a while after breakfast and found nothing. The so-called ghostly phenomena were not localized, it being Hardcase's impression that

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the spirit careened about the entire castle in its bellowing and rattling.

In the corridor a sudden pistol shot pulled him downstairs and to a half open door. He rushed in.

Elizabeth Tackaway Hope, the lovely amazon sobsister, stood with a large black pistol in her gently swinging right hand. She was crying.

"What's occurring?" asked Berfect.

"Alfred," said the girl, "I hate to have you see the sentimental side of me."

There was no one else in the room. Its only furniture was a bale of hay. Berfect had inspected the room earlier. Now there was a canvas bull eye target attached to the hay. "There's no danger then?"

Elizabeth shook her blonde head. "I should never attempt my target practice so soon after working on my column."

"Writing is a difficult and nerve wracking game."

The girl reloaded the pistol and raised it. "I was thinking of the poor soul who wrote me today, under the name of Love's Castaway, and I could not refrain from crying. Sobbing throws off one's aim." She fired again and missed the bull's eye by a quarter inch. "That's somewhat better. The poor girl was nearly ravished by all the members of a second-rate string quartet."

"Did none of them succeed?"

"I infer that the cellist may have."

Berfect frowned. "Tell me, Elizabeth. What is really causing this ghost do you think?"

"Mostly Teddybear's imagination."

"You've heard none of the sound and manifestations he's described to me."

"There are odd sounds," said the girl. "Though I don't put the ominous interpretation on them that Teddybear does." She gestured at Berfect with the pistol. "What is your opinion?"

"As yet I'm not certain."

"You have," she said, "searched the entire castle?"

"In a perfunctory way."

"Now you will stop?"

"I might," said Berfect. "I'm anxious, however, to come up with a solution before Winterness intrudes here."

The girl smiled, flexing her broad shoulders. "Winterness does an amusing turn. He's no threat. After all, you, Alfred, are the expert investigator. I would not even let the seance worry me."

"Seance?"

Elizabeth touched her chin with the pistol's barrel. "Tomorrow night. Teddybear insisted. Everything was arranged this morning at breakfast. I believe

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your wife and a few of Winterness' other followers will attend here."

Berfect took a deep angry breath. So deep that it caused him to tilt slightly backwards. "A telephone," he said.

"In the sitting room, two doors down."

BERFECT strode to the telephone and was about to grab it up and ask central for his home. There was a faint tapping at one of the room's two windows. The windows were modern additions, large and draped.

The tapping was on the right one. It stopped and then something appeared at the left window. This was open and a blond head appeared at it. As Berfect watched, his hands throttling the phone, Winterness floated in, horizontally, through the window.

The small medium floated almost into a reading table, quivered lengthwise and dropped, with a thump, to the flowered rug. "An unnecessary touch, you hoodlums," he said, rolling over and up. "Oh, Mr. Berfect. Forgive me for intruding. The spirits got impatient waiting for a street car and propelled me over themselves. They go in a great deal for entering at windows."

Berfect snapped the phone down and ran to the window. "No ropes," he said. He swung out, looking down, then up. He pulled back into the room and asked Winterness, "How'd you dispose of the apparatus so quickly?"

Winterness' plump fingers touched his blond hair into place and jerked at his earlobes. "They don't use apparatus in the spirit world. Enough of me, Mr. Berfect. I've been waiting to ask you about your short story, *The Slough,* which appeared in a recent *Scribner's.* I thought the character of MacQuarrie was finely . . ."

"You're going to stage a seance here?"

"Well, yes," said Winterness. "I'm here now to soak up vibrations and related manifestations. The spirits and I. They're not so prankish on fogridden days. Except for my Indian. He's almost always cranky."

"Let me caution you," said Berfect. "First, I'm going to clear up this fraudulent haunting without your help. Further, I'll be at your seance. You won't be able to trick me, nor will you be able to take advantage of Hardcase."

Winterness sighed. "Would you discuss your novels with me if not the short stories? *The Scow* I thought surpassed Crane or Norris. Zola is the name that most quickly comes to . . ."

"Tomorrow I'll settle you," said Berfect. He left the sitting

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room and resumed his investigation.

At nightfall he had still found nothing. And as he left the castle a tambourine somehow clouted him behind the ear.

THE rain dripping on the far edge of the Persian rug made a thick swampy sound. There was a raspy draft coming from that part of the big shadowy room as well, seemingly picking up an extra chillness from weaving through a clutter of some dozen white marble statues. The statues were all Venus in assorted poses, recently arrived at Hardcase's castle and as yet unpacked but not distributed.

Berfect found a new way to fold his arms. In addition to his wife, who wouldn't look at him any more, and Hardcase and his mistress, there were a Mr. and Mrs. Lumbard and a man named Gidings at the seance.

At the head of the round oak table sat Winterness. He was steaming slightly. He claimed the spirits had insisted on wafting over on the wings of the wind, causing him to get quite wet. On his smooth right ring finger the medium had a large topaze ring that he was running his left thumb over.

"Does that summon up your goblins?" Berfect asked him.

"I've got a bad strawberry rash," explained Winterness.

"Are your ghosts late again?" Berfect said, aware of Ella's frown.

"They came over with me. Now they're getting the lay of the castle, roaming about. Communing is like writing, Mr. Berfect, requiring not only industry and application but patience."

"Teddybear will wait all night for them," said Elizabeth. She smiled at Berfect, almost stuck out her tongue.

"Shall I extinguish the light now?" asked Hardcase, scooting back in his chair.

"Soon," said Winterness. He coughed and shivered with his shoulders. "I think something." He bounced once up and down and stiffened. "Lights, out."

The publisher circled the room and got the gas lights, felt back to his place. "Do we join hands?"

"Not necessary in my seances," mumbled the medium.

"Good evening," a voice said from the mouth of Winterness. It was a crackling old man's voice. "This is William Carlos McKimmey."

"Let me ask the questions," whispered Hardcase.

"I've been a spirit, let me see, it must be, oh I'd say, something under fourteen years now. I know it was very early in the '90s. I wish you could see the scrapbook my wife made of the funeral. Now it was certainly a funeral to make you proud. You

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see, I'm a Twenty Second Plateau Dacoit, that's the lodge as you all must know. I have no way of telling whether you people have ever seen a Twenty Second Plateau Dacoit funeral. It's something. Particularly since my wife, Frankie, was at the time a Fourteenth Level Worthy Strangler. You've just never seen so many white horses. Each Dacoit Hostel has its own white horse."

"My castle's haunted," broke in Hardcase. "Why?"

"First," said the voice of William Carlos McKimmey, "let me tell you how I came to be having a funeral at all. It was because I had died. Now I remember getting up that morning and having a bowl of oatmeal. Now I ate oatmeal every morning for, oh I'd estimate, 65 years. That morning, though, I said to myself, William Carlos, that oatmeal isn't sitting right. It . . ."

Berfect eased quietly back. It occurred to him that he could slip out now and smoke a cigar down in one of the game rooms. Winterness seemed in a mood to prolong his act to great length. Berfect let himself flow up and mingle with the darkness, sliding flatfooted over the soft rug to the doorway.

HE took one shallow breath and squeezed the door open. The hallway was dim. Berfect found a cigar in his vest pocket. The rain seemed louder here. As he descended the wide stone stairs he decided to visit the wine cellar. Hardcase never locked it and there was a particular pinot noir that Berfect was fond of. To compensate for having to endure the seance he would allow himself a glass or two of the pinot.

In a pantry he found a corkscrew and a tumbler. It wasn't a pinot glass but on a damp San Francisco night like this one the important thing was the wine itself and not the container.

A lantern sat on an empty cask at the fretted wood door of the wine cellar. Berfect adjusted the wick and lit it. The pinot he wanted was in the second room of the wine cellar, stored near a roughhewn oak table and chair.

Placing the lantern on the table Berfect slid a bottle of the dark red wine out of its nest and righted it. He opened it and set it next to the lantern. He decided to let it cork out for a few moments and wandered around the low thick aired room. There was no sound of rain here.

He bent to check a row of chablis. "Not the best year," said Berfect.

The lantern went dark.

Berfect spun, coming to his full height.

The door of this room was closed now. The darkness rolled toward him, pressing against his face, worrying his eyes.

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"You've been the one I've always feared. I had hoped you gave up your investigation."

"Elizabeth Tackaway Hope?"

"Winterness I don't worry about. He's a fraud, moderately amusing."

"May we relight the lantern?"

"I have only a moment to dispatch you and get back upstairs. Teddybear won't sit still for William Carlos much longer. Winterness shows an appalling lack of showmanship at times."

"Elizabeth, what did you say about dispatching me?"

"I'll break your neck so as to make it look like you fell. Not here. Upstairs in a back hall."

"Is there some reason for all this?" Berfect was sliding toward the girl, one silent step at a time.

"Certainly, Alfred. I can't allow you to write a complete account of the Shackamaxon disappearance. You needn't fence. You've obviously found out that he's buried, bricked up in the wall, just behind the pinot noir. I sensed that when I realized you'd left the seance."

"Judge Schackamaxon?"

"He had become much too belligerent over my leaving him for Teddybear. A judge can make an inordinate amount of trouble for a girl with a rising journalistic career. I throttled him one night and hid him here. Teddybear doesn't know. I'm vaguely sorry that you have tracked down the judge's body. Of course I've been afraid of that eventuality since you began investigating."

"I assure you," began Berfect. He stopped. He wasn't sure what sort of assurance it would take to calm her down. And, after all, even though she was a powerful girl he felt he could overcome her without trouble.

"I apologize for the syringe," said the girl. "It makes you much easier to throttle." She was quite suddenly near him and he felt the sting in his arm. "I've no more time to waste."

Berfect jumped sideways, striking out at the girl. The blackness was shading away to grey. "Elizabeth," he said, "this is a side of your personality I hardly . . ." He fell to his knees. his voice played out.

A tambourine rattled and the room became light. "This is no time for tambourines, fellows," said Winterness. He was standing by the table, a derringer aimed at the girl. "Thank goodness William Carlos McKimmey ran out of stories and let Judge Shackamaxon get his message through. Hands up then, Miss Hope."

"For a fraud," said the big blonde, "you're pretty perceptive."

Berfect fell the rest of the way down and passed out.

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THE sunlight at his bedroom window looked like Sunday morning sunlight. Berfect sat up. Ella's side of the big four-poster was empty.

"Alfred?" she said, moving into the room.

"I intended to finish a chapter on *Sewage* before breakfast this morning," he said. "It feels too late for that."

"Two in the afternoon," said his wife. "Dr. Cushman says you are to stay in bed today."

He reached out and caught her hand. "Was Judge Shackamaxon really bricked up in Hardcase's wine cellar?"

"Yes. Chief Inspector Rafferty McAfferty's men discovered him early this morning." She put her free hand on his forehead. "You should have told the police your discovery. Whatever led you to discover Elizabeth's dark secret?"

Berfect closed his eyes, particularly his left. "I don't see how that fraud, Winterness, found his way to the cellar."

"Judge Shackamaxon's ghost finally got through and told us. First that he'd been dispatched by Elizabeth and then of your plight," said his wife. "He's taken this long to get back from the spirit world. There's apparently a great deal of processing that precedes a return. It's only lately that he took to making noise in the castle. As a means of attracting attention until a medium came along."

"How do you suppose Winterness stumbled on all this?"

"I just told you."

Berfect opened his eyes. "I wish I didn't loathe him. I have to thank him for his rescuing of me."

"He's coming to tea on Tuesday."

Berfect started to swing out of bed. "Ella, I don't want any more spirit tappings and tambourines around our home."

"Mr. Winterness is coming alone, if he can manage to slip away without the spirits noticing," said Ella. "He wants to have a nice literary chat with you."

Berfect eased back into bed. He locked his hands behind his head. "Very well. But I won't autograph anything."

THE END

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The Vamp

By THOMAS M. DISCH

Once you marry a Transylvanian count, things are never what they used to be. Not even a good steak.

IF you live in Hollywood and have kids below seven years old, you probably know who I am. I'm Petey Bolger, of *Bolger's Soldiers*, the kiddyshow that's on Channel 6 at 5:30. Cap'n Petey as all the boys and girls call me. And maybe you've even heard of me from the old Green Arrow serials in the Forties. I was the guy that dressed up like the Green Arrow and did bad things that made people think the Green Arrow was bad.

Maybe you even remember me when I was Peter O'Shay. Probably not. That was a long time back.

I wouldn't even mention how I used to be Peter O'Shay except for what happened the other day on the street. I was just getting out of work. Kiddies everywhere and me were getting ready for dinner. Vine Street was bright with different colored neon lights almost like it was noon.

And there she was on the other side of the street. You couldn't help noticing even if it wasn't polite. She was pacing up and down real anxious, dressed in basic black that was cut a shade too flapperish and swishing a feather boa around like she'd just stepped out of a movie, which in a sense she had.

Whenever some man would come along, no matter how old he was, she'd start after him, very slinky with a lot of that boa. But what she needed was a lasso because nobody was buying what she had to offer. I mean even from a distance she looked about fifty.

Well, after a while, I could sort

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of tell she knew I was watching and she starts for me, and I had to change my estimate from fifty to a generous sixty plus.

I thought it was some kind of publicity stunt. Hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. The neon turned her make-up fishbelly white, and her rosebud lips were on all askew as though she'd done them without a mirror.

The lopsided lips parted in a smile, and her teeth glittered like cut glass. They were beautiful teeth—not capped (I can always tell capped teeth), but pretty, animal-passion teeth. In fact, there was only one person in the world who had teeth like that.

"Magda!" I cried out.

She didn't seem too happy to be recognized. She drew down a veil over her face and came up close to see who I was.

Who I was was her second husband.

"Magda! Darling!" I pleaded. "It's me—Petey. Petey O'Shea. You can't have forgotten your own dear *Petey?*"

"Petey?" Magda repeated darkly.

"Darling love, don't you remember when you were Neva in *Kiss Me, Fool,* and I was Lockheed? There was this scene out in the garden, and you were holding a chocolate-covered cherry cream up to those famous rosebud lips and I bent over you and. . . ."

"Petey! Petey Villiams!"

I forgot to mention that Williams was my real name. O'Shea and Bolger were made-up.

"You do remember then. Of course, I don't see how anybody could forget that kiss, Magda. I read somewhere that was one of the ten greatest kisses of all time." I pushed Magda out to arm's length and looked her over again. You could see how she'd once been thought more beautiful than even Theda Bara. So I took a little liberty with what I said. "Gosh Magda, you're looking the same as ever. Seeing you again, it makes me wonder where the gang is all gone to. Sometimes it seems that I'm the only one left, that everyone else is dead."

"I know that feeling too," she said.

"Where have you *been?*"

"I left the moofies vhen they began to make the talking pictures. . . ." Magda's scratchy contralto hadn't changed either.

"Gee, Magda, I remember how it was. Me, I always thought your accent was pretty."

"I vas married then to Fic Grafes. No, it vas Glenn Kline then. Fic was earlier. Ve vent to Monte Carlo and Glenn lost all his money."

"At the casinos?" Whenever I can I try to point out to people the evil consequences of gambling, which is how I lost my wad.

"No, in the Crash. Fic killed himself. A terrible tragedy."

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"I thought you said it was Glenn."

"That's right — Glenn killed himself, and Fic died in an automobile accident. It vas a terrible tragedy."

"Well," I said in my ultra-cheerful voice that I usually save for breakfast food commercials, "you're still alive and kicking."

SHE laughed with that unpleasant laugh she has, which was an even better reason than her voice why she could never get anywhere in talkies.

"It vas my fate to bring death vith me eferyvhere I go. Vhen I kiss a man, he must die!"

"Gosh almighty, Magda, I don't think that's fair. You married *me*, and I'm in great shape. Except the weight I've put on lately. The producer wants me to gain more weight yet. He says it makes me look more like a grandfather."

But Magda never was a good listener. "I vas desperate," she said. "I vas ready to do anything. That's vhy I married Count Vintersturn."

"No kidding? A real count?"

"He vas vun of the nobility in Transylfania. Ve vent there to live. Then the Var came. The Russians stayed in Castle Vintersturm . . . and then . . ." Magda lowered her long black lashes and snuggled up against me. It stirred up all kinds of old memories. "But it is ofer now. The Count is dead. Castle Vintersturm is burnt to the ground. And I hafe escaped with scarcely a memento of my natife soil."

"Gee whiz, Magda, I'm sorry."

"Yes, it vas a terrible tragedy. The Count met a fiolent death, but vee vill not speak of the past. Ve vill speak of now. 'Kiss me, Petey!"

"On the street? I mean things aren't the way they used to be. I mean I'm Petey *Bolger* now, and if any of the little soldiers saw me kissing—well, it wouldn't be good publicity for the show."

But Magda wouldn't listen to me. She just pulled her thin little body up to where her lips were next to mine and kissed. I had a hard time getting her off.

"Where'd you ever learn to kiss like that?"

"It is a tradition of Transylfania, a custom. Kiss me again."

It was the way I'd always remembered her. Sort of.

"But it hurts," I said.

"Poo! You are such a little boy."

"Well, gee whiz, Magda, you bite!"

"Fool!"

"You know you haven't changed one iota. You're just as pretty as a rose in a vase of milk-glass. For me, everything has changed. You wouldn't believe it, but I'm M.C. on a kiddyshow now—*Bolger's Soldiers*. Maybe, you've seen it. It's on Channel 6 at 5:30."

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"I am nefer up then. It is my complexion. I haf a fery delicate complexion and I nefer go out in the sun. Besides, I do not like telefision."

"I don't either, but it's a living. One good thing it's done for me—remember how I used to swear so much? Well, now I never say anything worse than garsh-darn. What do you think of that?"

But she wasn't listening to me again. In fact, she's sort of fainted in my arms. It reminded me of a movie we made in '23. *Deadly Woman,* when Magda fainted in my arms the same way, only she was just pretending to faint in order to make me bring her to my apartment. They didn't call Magda the "Vamp" for nothing. I patted her cold, white cheeks and asked what was wrong.

Her beautiful, dark eyes fluttered open. "Petey," she said, "I am hungry. I am *so* hungry."

Imagine being so hungry you faint! "Well, darling," I said, using my ultra-cheerful tone again, "why didn't you say so before? Listen, you're coming home with me, and I'll cook you up something to eat."

Magda's reaction was strange for someone who was supposed to be so hungry. She grew a shade whiter and shook her head fiercely. "No!"

"Don't argue. What would you say to a good sirloin—"

"Steak?"

"Uh-huh. And a nice Caesar salad, and . . ."

"Vill you fix it for me *fery* rare?"

"However you like it, Magda."

"Petey, I could kiss you!"

I was feeling sort of like I'd been talked into something, but, gee whiz, when a person is hungry and you've got something for them to eat, shouldn't you let them have it?

I LIVE in a bungalow by myself. It isn't like the places we had back in the Twenties, but it isn't as bad as some of the places I've seen since. Anyway, I didn't see any need to apologize. Magda had changed some in the meantime herself.

"It is fery exotic," Magda whispered the minute I unlocked the door. "No, do not turn on the lights. It is more beautiful in the dark."

"But I can't *see* in the dark. Wait till I've got some candles and thrown the steak in the broiler."

"Vait! Do you haf mirrors here? I cannot stand to look in mirrors. It is because I am so old. Cofer the mirrors."

"The only mirror is in the bedroom."

"Cofer it!"

Magda looked different, but she still behaved the same. Just to humor her I covered the mirror in the bedroom.

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"It is cofered?" I nodded. "Good," she said. "Now, vhen you make my steak, I vant it to be vun minute on the top and a haf minute on the bottom. You can do that?"

"That sure is a rare steak. That's practically raw."

"Kiss me, you fool!"

Magda was very excitable. She needed a restraining influence like mine to keep her passions in check. I temporized. "Wait till I've got the steak going, huh? Because you're just going to faint again."

"I faint because you excite me. Come here."

"Magda, I don't know about *you*, but I need a drink first. You just wait in the living room, and I'll be right back. Okay?"

So I went into the kitchen and put the steak under the broiler, and set the timer for two minutes. It was all a lie about needing a drink. I had to give that up years ago.

When I got back to the living room with a candle in a saucer, Magda was spread out on the divan with the boa wrapped around her just like in the movie, *Femme Fatale*. She blew me a kiss.

"Hafe you had your drink?" she asked.

I nodded yes, which was a white lie.

"Then let me taste it."

Just to be polite, I took the hand she was holding out to me, and she pulled me in as easy as reeling in a fish to those famous rosebud lips. Well, I decided to bide my time (the steak must have had only a minute left) so I started kissing her fingernails, one at a time, and then her palm, and on up to her shoulder, just the way I did in the movie, *Woman from Hell*. I was even starting to enjoy it, since I couldn't see too clearly with just that one candle on the coffee table. By the time I got to her shoulder, Magda was quivering all over with excitement. Her lips caressed the nape of my neck, where I'm ticklish, and I sort of jumped, I guess.

I don't know how she did it, but there was a rip all the way down the back of my shirt.

"Magda," I scolded, "this is carrying things too far. That was a ten dollar shirt you just ripped down the back."

"Be still, fool. Embrace me."

The timer on the stove rang. "I have to turn over the steak," I said.

THIS time when I came back, Magda had blown out the candle and left the divan. I felt around for her in the dark, the way Navarro had in the Blind Man's Buff sequence in *Lulu Tangiers*, although I don't suppose many of you have seen that one, since it must go back to '22 at least.

Magda caught hold of me from

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behind and dug her fingernails into my shoulders. Her rosebud lips nibbled at my neck.

"Magda," I said, "don't *do* that. Magda! That hurts, I tell you." I was getting very annoyed with her, and that's a fact. I mean she wouldn't listen to reason. So I hit her.

I hit her in the stomach with my elbow. It was like the time Cagney hit Junette Blossom in *Rough Stuff*. Right that minute the timer rang again.

"It serves you right," I admonished her. That was a very sick thing to do. It's like something in Tennessee Williams. "Now, you quiet down, and I'll go get your steak from the broiler. You need something to *eat*, darling. Your nerves are on edge."

That little bit of time in the oven had hardly warmed the blood in the steak. It didn't seem decent to bring it to the table like that. When I brought it out to the table, Magda was standing there like some animal ready to spring. I don't think I've ever seen anyone so hungry. She grabbed the platter right out of my hands, and I swear, she sank her teeth right into it like she'd never heard of a knife and fork.

Well, that was the last straw!

The next thing you know, she'd let loose of the dish like it was a hot iron and sort of snarled and then started making these funny, gasping sounds, which got louder and louder, but you couldn't hear them once she'd gone out the front door.

I looked around outside, but she'd vanished into thin air, as far as I could see.

The platter had fallen to the table without spilling the blood all over, and I took the whole thing back to the kitchen, since it was a shame to let a beautiful steak like that go to waste.

It smelled so good, I was drooling. I'd fixed it just like I knew Magda used to like her steaks. Rubbed down with plenty of garlic. It made a person's eyes water just to smell it.

Magda was *crazy* running out on a meal like that.

THE END

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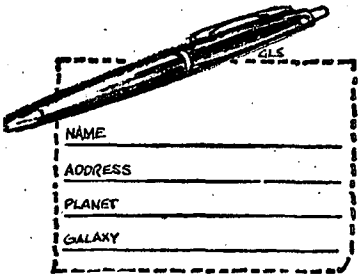

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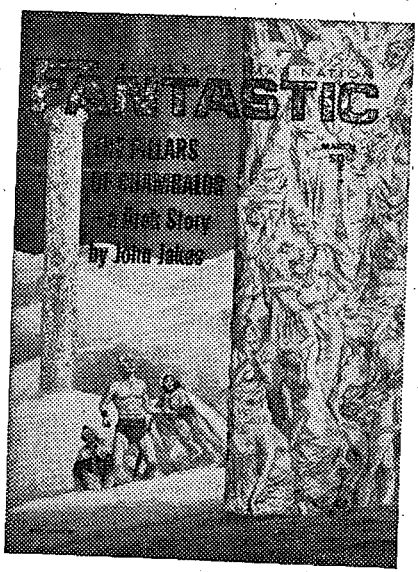

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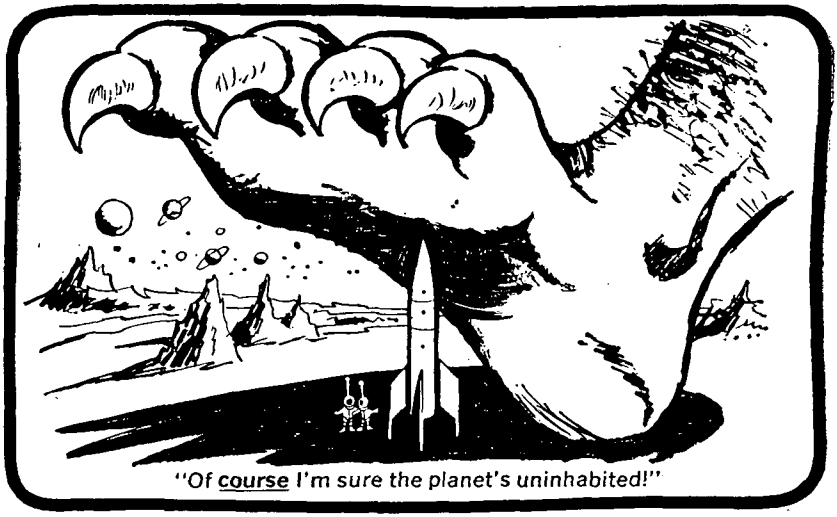

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